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ELSIE'S MARRIED LIFE.

A TALE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

MRS. MACKENZIE DANIEL,

Author of "My Sister Minnie," "After Long Years," "Our
Brother Paul," "The Old Maid of the Family,"
"Reaping the Whirlwind," &c.

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ELSIE'S MARRIED LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

THE ANONYMOUS LETTER.

THERE was no chance of Mr. Oliver allowing Joanna to forget the promise he had exacted from her as the condition of his remaining another week in Paris; neither did there appear much chance of Joanna being inclined to do so.

Happiness—such happiness as she now enjoyed in the sincere and tender love of the only man to whom she had ever given a single thought—was far too novel a thing to this sensitive, but hitherto

lonely hearted girl, for her to do otherwise than bask gladly in its warmth and light, to caress and make much of it, as a fond mother would of a child long despaired of, but given to her arms at last.

And to James Oliver it was a pleasure rare, refined, and as he believed, inexhaustible, to watch, in the woman he now dearly loved, that flood of sunshine breaking through her whole nature, which Joanna never even tried to hide from him, and which he knew she gloried in owing, under the God she humbly served, to him.

Apart too from their mutual attachment they suited each other admirably. They had always possessed many tastes, many ideas, in common, even in those days when Mr. Oliver, through the influence of an ardent imagination, had been led captive by Elsie's childish loveliness and grace; and now that their views and aims in life were the same, and that they looked forward, with unspeakable gratitude, to the prospect of spending that life together, it was no wonder that these

two should not weary of being constantly in each other's society, nor that they should be quite indifferent as to what the world said of their independent proceedings.

It was only in the evenings that the rest of the family saw anything of them, and then they usually sat together while Mrs. Vining played for the delight and admiration of her now all but acknowledged suitor, or Elsie sang—often her old English songs—for the amusement of the party generally.

“I wish,” said Joanna, on one occasion, when she had remarked with what pleasure Mr. Oliver had been listening to her younger sister's singing, “I wish for your sake, James, that I had some talent for music. I would begin to cultivate it, even now, if I had, but I fear it would be all useless, and a waste of time. You ought to have had a wife who could at least sing.”

“Ought I?” he replied, looking at her with a smile that must have reassured the most self-distrustful heart in the world. “Well, I cannot

explain to you how it is, dear, for I do love music almost passionately, and yet it is quite true that I have not the least regret that you neither play nor sing. I suppose, Jo, a real, true love can see no deficiency, can desire no shadow of a change, in the beloved object."

Now it happened that Elsie, who had given up her place at the piano to Mrs. Vining, and was hovering restlessly (she had grown strangely restless of late) about the part of the room where the lovers sat—it happened that she overheard just the latter clause of Mr. Oliver's very tender speech to her sister—heard and made her own private comments thereon.

Yes, a real, true love would indeed be incapable of either fault-finding or complaint, a real, true love would see perfection where others saw deficiency. If Edgar had loved her as James Oliver loved Joanna, would he ever have required her to take music lessons? Would he ever have treated her as a child with an imperfect education, who, because she was young and docile, might be

trained and disciplined into something which, by and bye, would perchance not disgrace him as his wife, and the mother of his children?

Poor Elsie, you see, had not forgotten her father-in-law's observations on that last morning which she had spent alone with him, and in the present warped and uneasy state of her mind this remembrance played no unimportant part in convincing her that her husband had never really loved her; that he had married her for her youth and good looks, and because he wanted an English wife to head his establishment and to become the mother of his children.

James Oliver, who was now the type of a real lover in this little woman's foolish eyes, cared nothing for conventionalities, despised the opinion of that world Mr. Carlyon held in such respect, suffered nothing and no one to stand between him and the woman he had chosen; and finally regarded her as without speck or flaw from head to foot—morally, physically, and intellectually.

Happy Joanna! She had come suddenly into

possession of life's one dazzling, golden crown, she had had poured into her lap, while she looked not for them, the very brightest flowers of paradise that could still bloom in this cold and desert world.

True indeed she deserved all this and more, and Elsie could rejoice, even in the midst of her own bitterness of spirit, at the happiness of that dear sister who had ever been as a mother to her—but still, still, there was the old craving, the old asking for warmth and sunshine for herself too, the childlike questioning as to why, when her eager, hungry soul yearned for bread she should receive only a stone.

It happened that just at this time Edgar (believing possibly that with both her sisters and their respective cavaliers his wife could not miss him) was a good deal from home, and that not unfrequently, when he returned, there was a cloud upon his countenance, an aspect of general unrest and worry which did not escape Elsie's observation, nor tend to dissipate the uneasiness of her own

mind. If ever she asked him where he had been, or what doing, she fancied his replies were vague and indefinite, and that the way he evidently shrank from being questioned proved, not only that Mr. Carlyon senior was right in warning her not to try her husband's patience in this manner, but also that Edgar had some secret which he was determined his poor little unloved wife should never share.

And here it may suggest itself to some one to enquire whether Elsie's distress (which was growing into a very positive thing) took any more definite form than a general belief that her husband had never loved her as she loved him, and as she had always hoped to be loved. Did she really believe that there was another woman in the way, nearer to his heart, and with whom all that was mysterious and unexplainable in his conduct must be connected?

No. Hitherto her mind had never reached the point of actual jealousy; her tender feet had never yet trodden that cruel ground where every step is

on fierce, burning coals, and where every breath is drawn from a scorching and poisoned atmosphere.

It remained for one unscrupulous, reckless hand to lead her there ; and while all around her, engrossed for the time in their own pleasures or interests, were deeming Elsie's happiness secure, were wholly unconscious on what a tottering foundation it already stood, the enemy was preparing his weapons, was sharpening the two edged sword that was destined to cut deep into the heart and life of this hapless child, who shivered and moaned if only a passing cloud came between her and the sunshine.

James Oliver returned to England at the end of his extra week, but not before he had arranged that Joanna should come and share his home the very moment he could get one ready for her. This would be, he said, while there was still some green in the land, some flowers blooming upon the earth which had become so rich to him since he had won the heart he prized above all that

earth's most precious things. And Joanna, trembling at the full tide of joy that rushed in upon her at every renewed proof that she was loved even as she herself loved, stood before her future husband with a brightly glowing cheek, and suffered him to read in her truthful eyes, though her lips were silent, that she should esteem no lot so blessed as that of dwelling with him in any home he might prepare for her.

A few days after Mr. Oliver's departure Mrs. Vining announced to her sisters that her admirer had spoken out plainly, and asked her to be his wife, adding, not much to their astonishment, though certainly to the regret of one of them, that she had accepted his proposals, and was to become Madame Guinchard early in the ensuing month.

It need scarcely be said that from this time the widow's hands and mind were full — so full indeed of work and thought and preparations of various kinds, that Joanna need have indulged in no fears respecting the

aching of her heart. That might come by and bye, when, in her luxurious home at Lyons, with her new lord, she would have leisure to look back and reflect; but at present nothing of the sort was even possible, and all the hearts in Paris, including her own, might have been not only aching but breaking, without Georgina Vining rousing herself from her multitudinous occupations to a consciousness of the fact.

So Elsie and her griefs were perfectly safe from any espionage in that quarter; and Joanna, whose eyesight, now that her lover had gone, would certainly have been keener, was unexpectedly invited at this time to spend a few days with poor Lillie, Mr. Richard Wilmot having announced to his wife that he had business in the provinces which would take him from home for a rather uncertain period.

Joanna wrote from Versailles to tell Elsie and Mrs. Vining that Lillie was not looking nearly so well as when they had seen her last, that her mind appeared unusually harassed and depressed,

but that she acknowledged to no new trouble, and declared herself still quite ignorant of all her husband's pursuits and means of livelihood.

There seemed, Joanna added, no want of ready money, nor of any ordinary comforts in the establishment, but she remarked that Lillie spent as little as she possibly could, and denied herself some things which appeared really necessary for her, and which judging from her present command of money there was no absolute occasion for her going without.

The inference that Joanna could not help drawing from her observations was that poor Mrs. Wilmot, though kept in the dark to a certain extent as to her husband's occupations and associates, was still persuaded that these were of a disreputable kind, and consequently shrank from using money that might have been even dishonestly obtained.

Mr. Cheviot continued still her firm and untiring friend, bringing her from time to time

books and flowers and sweetmeats—such things as he deemed it justifiable to offer to a lady who was in fact young enough to have been his daughter, but whom he would not have humiliated (by any appearance of conferring favours upon her) for the whole world.

“So you see,” wrote Joanna—out of the fullness no doubt of her own grateful, satisfied heart, “in every lot, however bitter, there is a little taste of sweetness left, to prove to us that Our Father loves and pities His children even while He is sending them those trials which are needful to lead them to Himself.”

It would have been well for poor Elsie had she pondered rather more earnestly upon this comforting truth before the next cloud burst upon her, and filled her trembling, frightened soul with the belief that heaven and earth were alike failing her.

One evening as she sat at home alone waiting for Edgar, who had gone out immediately after dinner, promising (as she complained of head-

ache) to come and take her for a walk, as she sat doing nothing, but just nursing her vague unhappiness and thinking that even Lillie was less to be pitied than herself, her maid came suddenly into the room and handed her mistress a letter.

A man had left it with the porter for madame, she said, and with a special request, accompanied by a bribe most likely, that it should be delivered immediately into madame's own hands if she were alone, or kept for her if she were not.

Having explained thus much the discreet waiting woman retired, wondering that her young mistress, being such a child in years and experience, should not have looked more guilty and confused when she received the letter.

In point of fact, Elsie's only feeling was one of bewilderment, as she listened to her servant's account of how the dubious note she held in her hand had been left, and as she discovered that it was addressed in French, in a writing wholly unfamiliar to her.

These were the contents, translated into English.

"A sincere well-wisher of Madame Carlyon has decided, after mature consideration, upon informing her that the husband she trusts and honours is basely and cruelly deceiving her. There is a young and beautiful lady residing at present, in great seclusion, at Versailles. This lady receives but one visitor, upon whose name and position in society Monsieur Edgar Carlyon might, if he chose, be able to throw some light. The writer of the present letter has no motive but to warn Madame Carlyon against a too implicit trust in a man who, whatever his outward seeming and professions, has in reality as black and deceitful a heart as all Paris could produce. Madame Carlyon is earnestly recommended not to show this letter, but to watch diligently, to question cautiously, and by degrees to find out the disgraceful truth for herself."

Three separate times, with burning cheeks and quivering lips, Elsie read over the above words before her startled mind entirely took in their

extraordinary purport. When it had quite succeeded in doing so, in gaining a really clear notion of all that her anonymous correspondent implied, her first wild impulse was to ring the bell violently, to send for her bonnet and shawl, and to rush out alone into the already partially darkened streets in search of her husband.

This, I repeat, was her first impulse, while the mind was half stunned and wholly turned out of its natural course by the blow it had received. But before the bell could be answered, another feeling had succeeded, a terrible, agonizing shrinking from even seeing her husband—much less accusing him, as she first thought to do—lest any word or look should, in spite of his indignant denials, confirm, or seem to confirm, the statements of that cruel letter.

It was rather a singular fact, though quite in accordance with the tendencies of Elsie's nature, that she should never for a moment entertain a doubt that her husband *would* deny the whole charge.

She could bring herself to the point of doubting his truth and honour, even upon such feeble testimony as that of an ill-written, clumsily-worded letter from an unknown hand; but she could not get the length of believing her doom so sure and unalterable as it must be, could Edgar do less than swear the whole thing to be a delusion and a cheat.

And though amongst weak women it might be difficult to find a weaker than Elsie Carlyon, she is not the only one whose domestic peace has been shaken to its very centre, if not entirely destroyed through the medium of that most cruel and cowardly of all human weapons, an anonymous letter.

When her astonished waiting-maid appeared in answer to her imperative summons, instead of asking for a bonnet and cloak, Elsie said she felt faint and ill, and would go at once to bed. Monsieur was to be informed that her headache had increased, and requested not to disturb her.

The same message, with the addition of apologies for not waiting up for Mrs. Vining, was to be given to that lady when she came in.

“Very sure that could not have been a love letter, after all,” was the thought of the acute Frenchwoman, as she received these orders and went out to prepare her young mistress’s bedroom. “Madame is as white as a corpse, and even Englishwomen, droll as they are, don’t look scared like that when gentlemen make them declarations. Poor young lady! Perhaps she has heard of the death of some old lover, and is afraid monsieur will observe her pale face. *Allons!* I will tell him her head is distracting her, and give him a hint that shall keep him easy, and make him very kind and tender over her.”

CHAPTER II.

THE VISION IN THE AIR.

MADemoiselle CLARICE's well intended hint, which she failed not to give her master as soon as she could see him alone, did exactly what she intended it to do. It made Mr. Carlyon set down to a most natural cause all that, dating from that evening, appeared strange and otherwise inexplicable either in the manner or conduct of his wife. When Elsie, after a sleepless night of such mental torture as few things except doubt of one we love can produce, declared her inability to rise on account of the continued pain in her head, her husband caressed and soothed her tenderly, told

her to lie quite still, and not even attempt to speak, and that he would bring her breakfast up to her himself.

Poor Elsie was far too hungry for love and kindness to reject disdainfully (as a woman of any spirit would have done) what she believed to be only a hypocritical semblance of affection, or at most the sort of affection which pity for a weak and helpless object might inspire. So she murmured a few low words of thanks to her husband, and then closed her burning eyes, and resolutely kept back her tears from flowing till he came to her again.

There was no pretence at all about the actual physical pain she was enduring. She had thought and thought, till, as on one former occasion, her mind seemed to become quite incapable of thinking any longer; but there was this great difference between that time and the present. Then, her apprehensions and doubts being all vague and undefined, pointing to no known or living object in connection with her husband, she could, when

they had grown unendurable, throw them off altogether by the vigorous exercise of that mental faculty which had helped her always in struggling out of the shade into the sunshine. *Now*, there was a real, tangible, living presence to grapple with, a woman "young and beautiful," (oh, how those two adjectives were burnt in upon Elsie's brain!) whose very place of abode was revealed to her, corresponding but too correctly with a previous haunting suspicion in reference to that very locality. As to who might be the writer of the letter, the hapless recipient of it did not as yet trouble herself much to conjecture. It is true she had at first thought it possible that Dick Wilmot might have had a hand in it, but the remembrance of his ignorance of the French language, and the unlikelihood, as it appeared to her, of even this bad man employing an agent in such a matter, caused her soon to reject the idea of her brother-in-law being concerned in it, and to decide that it mattered not one bit who the revealer was, since he had accomplished his object

of compelling her to accept, as at least a probable truth, the horrible thing revealed.

The young and beautiful woman living alone at Versailles, occupying the place in her husband's heart which she, his wife, had every right to fill, claiming his time, his thoughts, his love, perhaps making him wish every hour of every day that he were free to give her his name with all the rest he gave.

This was the horrible thing that was henceforth to be poor little Elsie's constant companion, the ghastly vision that was to be with her in her lying down and in her rising up, in her sleeping no less than in her waking thoughts; the enemy armed at all points who was to resist her utmost efforts either at escape or defeat, and who would only laugh mockingly at her if ever in obedience to the instincts of her nature, she cried wildly for help or rescue to the silent earth or the unanswering heavens.

It often happens that when a woe is past we wonder greatly at the manner in which we were

enabled to bear it, and feel that could it return, our powers of endurance would be infinitely smaller, and more rapidly exhausted. So it is in looking forward to a possible calamity, because strength is given only for the present moment, and rarely either in retrospect or in advance. To say that Elsie bore the first brunt of her new and strange trial *well*, would be saying far too much, for, in truth, she writhed and smarted in every fibre of her being under it, but she bore it to herself; she concealed it very tolerably from those around her, and, I think, this was a great deal for so weak and frail and dependent a creature to accomplish.

There is no doubt that but for the opportune insinuations of her maid Clarice, and the impression fixed thereby on the mind of her husband, it would have been almost impossible for Elsie, in her constantly low spirits and with her frequent, hysterical attacks, to have escaped a questioning that might in the end have led to a revelation of the whole truth—but Edgar, per-

fectly satisfied that his wife's symptoms were natural and inevitable, very happy, too, in the prospect of becoming a father, believed she was better let alone for the present, and so contented himself with additional kindness and attention to the drooping invalid, who was fain to accept greedily all he gave, and who shrank from contradicting the belief to which she soon understood she owed even this semblance of love and tenderness, and which saved her too from being either wondered at or questioned.

"You must really rouse up, Elsie, for my wedding," Mrs. Vining said to her one day, as the period fixed for that ceremony was approaching. "*Monsieur Guinchard* would be quite distressed to see such a pale, melancholy face accompanying me to the altar. I'm sure I can't remember beinghipped in this way when I was going to have my darling Arthur; but I suppose your long illness has left some weakness in your system which shows itself in this frightful nervous depression now. I think we had much better have Joanna

back from Versailles at once, as I have so little time to devote to you."

"Not for the world," replied Elsie, with a quickness and an energy she had rarely displayed of late. "Jo is very happy where she is, and Lillie must find her an unspeakable comfort. Since they are both to be here for your wedding, they had better only come the day before. I am all right, Georgina," she added, with a dreary attempt at sudden cheerfulness; "and don't want any other society than my husband's. Why should I?"

"Why indeed, my dear?" said the widow, carelessly, and with her thoughts wandering off to the last important order she had given her milliner that morning. "I am sure a more devoted husband never lived. It must be your own fault if you are not perfectly happy."

Her own fault! It was a simple thing to have said to her, and Elsie knew in what a light, indifferent spirit Mrs. Vining had spoken, and yet the words irritated her at the moment almost

past endurance. She saw floating in the air above her (alas! when did she *not* see it?) the vision of a young and beautiful woman, and she felt the strongest impulse to cry aloud and revile that unknown shadow, and declare that it was *her* fault, only hers.

Luckily for the preservation of the wife's secret, Mrs. Vining left the room without even observing that her thoughtless remark had distressed her sister, and then poor Elsie could clench the hands that were growing so thin and white, and strain her eyes to discern more clearly that floating vision in the air (her imagination painted it daily in fairer and brighter colours) and whisper to her tortured heart alone, the sick loathing which that beauty and that grace inspired.

It seemed strange, though, perhaps, it is but a common experience, that all the bitterness and animosity of Elsie Carlyon's nature, which had been called into life by the discovery of her husband's treachery and infidelity, should be poured out wholly upon her unknown rival, while not a

single angry or resentful feeling had as yet been excited against him. I cannot, of course, say how it would have been had Edgar's outward manner changed in any degree towards his wife; but, as it was, she felt certain that she loved him more than ever, and accepted with a hundred fold the gratitude of happier days, every token of affection and kindness that he lavished, and certainly with no niggard hand, upon her.

It was because he fancied it would give his poor little nervous, low-spirited Elsie especial gratification, that he had suggested her asking Mrs. Wilmot, in her husband's absence, to come with Joanna to Mrs. Vining's wedding, and although neither this nor anything else could, in itself, be productive of the smallest comfort to Elsie, while the haunting shadow of her life still walked beside her, she thanked Edgar cordially for the kindness of the thought; and, for the sake of those others whom it would gratify, failed not to act upon it.

The anonymous letter had advised her to watch

narrowly and question cautiously, till by degrees she should find out for herself the truth of the accusation made by the writer. Many women, had they been weak enough to attach any credit at all to such a letter, would no doubt have acted strictly in accordance with its wise counsel ; but Elsie could not do this ; she had no heart for it, no courage. She did not want to have the truth—if truth it was—confirmed to her. She would gladly and thankfully have drunk of the waters of Lethe and forgotten the whole thing, even though such forgetfulness had entailed the certainty of her rival maintaining her present ground undisputed.

I wonder if any of my readers will see clearly the character I am attempting to paint, will understand the nature—I believe it to be an exceptional one—which would have chosen the most profound mental blindness, which would have sacrificed any amount of dignity, which would have foregone the very sweetest and most complete revenge, if by such a course it could

just escape the purely personal misery from which all its instincts so strongly and imperiously revolted.

Most women, as I believe, under a similar suspicion to that which was in reality eating into the very core of Elsie's life, would have taken some steps to discover who and what the lady was, in the flesh, whose shadowy presence upon their hearths robbed them of all joy and comfort. But it never even occurred to Elsie to do anything of the sort. She thoroughly believed in the actual existence of such a person, and while her vivid imagination could not help investing the unknown with every graceful and lovely attribute, with the form and features we give to angels in our dreams, she would not voluntarily have looked upon that woman's living face, though death had been the penalty of her refusal to do so.

It was bad and terrible enough as it was—why should she seek to make the woe more bitter? As yet Edgar was kind to her; with all her feverish anxiety and proneness to take alarm, she

could detect no vestige of an outward change in him, and while she said to herself continually that she owed all his present tenderness to his hopes of her becoming a mother—was not her father-in-law even officiously affectionate and assiduous in his attentions just now?—Still Elsie could breathe *somehow* in the artificial atmosphere which so closely resembled the natural one she had hitherto grown and flourished in.

So, like a delicate flower that lifts its drooping head after a storm, to catch the faintest ray of sunshine, and expands a little gladly in its beams, unconscious of the fiercer tempest that may be coming to destroy it utterly, Elsie tried to raise *her* weary head to where the warmth and the brightness might once more fall at least soothingly upon it.

But the flower that a little sunshine would suffice to revive and make bloom afresh, is often killed by a cold and nipping wind, that may come when it is least expected ; and the passionate cry of a human heart for the comfort that it

thinks will heal it, is sometimes answered by a voice that seems to shake both the Heavens and the earth, and to leave the frightened heart stunned and mute for ever.

CHAPTER III.

THE WIDOW MARRIED.

MR. CARLYON senior, justly proud of his achievement in having so soon found a husband for Mrs. Vining, insisted on bearing himself all the immediate expenses in connection with her wedding, and as the old gentleman's notions on the subject of money were always, to do him justice, of a princely kind, the bride's love of magnificence and display were for once amply gratified, and the favored few who were invited to the marriage breakfast—Elsie's state of health was a good excuse for excluding all but their most intimate friends—went away with the conviction that

“those Carlyons” must really have an inordinate passion for show, or be possessed of more money than they knew very well what to do with.

Lillie and Joanna arrived, as had been previously arranged, the day before their widowed sister was to become Madame Guinchard. They both discovered at once how ill and changed altogether Elsie was looking; but Mrs. Vining, who had been over to Versailles to introduce her intended husband to Mrs. Wilmot, had spoken to them then of the general belief of the household in reference to its young mistress; and as Elsie, when questioned by them both, said nothing in disproof of this impression, they gladly adopted it as a very natural explanation of her altered appearance, and, in accordance with a wish expressed by Mr. Carlyon, forbore to tease her with any further remarks or enquiries on the subject.

Then, too, poor Elsie had ^{been} done, and was continuing to do, her very best to rally and put on a cheerful face for this great occasion. She did

not want a single cloud to rest on any of the party on her account—especially she wanted her dear, long suffering Lillie to enjoy the brief holiday that had come unexpectedly in her way, the very first respite or breathing time from persecution and wretchedness that had been granted to her since her own ill-fated marriage to Richard Wilmot.

Felix Paget had been invited to his sister's wedding, and Mrs. Vining (who was proud of her distinguished looking brother) had even urged him strongly to come, but he pleaded the impossibility of leaving his increasing duties at a time when Mr. Oliver was so occupied in preparing a home for his future wife—sent his sister Georgina a handsome present, wished her every happiness in her new condition, and ended by affectionate messages to his other sisters, and a promise of meeting Joanna half-way on her journey to England as soon as she was ready to come.

No doubt the letter which reached that young

lady at the same time, though in a different handwriting, contained more distinct allusions and entreaties on the subject of the journey in question, for Joanna began, very soon after, to speak of her return home as a thing that was rapidly approaching, and poor Lillie felt indeed that she must make the most of her little hour of sunshine and repose, with the dear ones she might never again be permitted to have around her.

Upon the whole, Mrs. Richard Wilmot did very sincerely enjoy her short visit at her sister Elsie's house.

Mr. Carlyon, secure of no intrusion from the hateful Dick, and anxious just now above all things to please his own little drooping wife, bestowed even marked attention upon that poor Lillie who had hitherto, on account of the 'live stock' to which she was bound, been somewhat of a *bête noir* to this fastidious and sensitive gentleman—and then there was her friend Mr. Carus Cheviot, invited entirely on her account, and who

was so heartily and genuinely delighted to find her at length where he had always wanted to see her, that he expressed his satisfaction in almost too demonstrative a manner, winning a passing smile from even the pale Elsie, and causing the mirthful bride to remark that if ever Dick Wilmot (whose head she still hoped to punch some day), died by poison, she should have no difficulty in guessing to whom he owed the dose.

Mr. Carlyon the elder was amongst the gayest and the most convivial of the guests at that feast of his own providing. He had acted as father to the magnificent bride, who really looked so well and handsome in her wedding finery, and divested for the first time of those lugubrious streamers, that for nearly ten minutes the old gentleman thought he had made a mistake in not acting himself the part of bridegroom; but luckily he got over this temptation to break the tenth commandment by the time they were seated at the breakfast table, and suffered his admiration of madame to expend itself in hearty congratula-

tions to monsieur, who rubbed his bald head, shrugged his round shoulders, and admitted that he considered himself a very happy man indeed.

Perhaps this agreeable view of the case might have been somewhat modified, had the worthy gentleman been present at a little scene that was going on at the same time upstairs.

Mrs. Vining, true to her professions of strong-mindedness, had shed no tears, had exhibited no emotion whatever, while her sisters, with somewhat pale faces and trembling hands, were helping her to exchange her bridal for her travelling dress; but after this was accomplished, and both Lillie and Elsie had spoken their last affectionate words, had bestowed upon the still blooming cheek of the new made bride their last sisterly kisses, Madame Guinchard was left, for a short space, alone with Joanna, who had reserved this opportunity for a final loving admonishing of the sister concerning whom she had once cherished such sanguine hopes, on that all important sub-

ject which had recently been not even named between them.

“Oh, for pity’s sake, Jo, anything but a sermon!” said Georgina, the moment she discovered what, to use her own words, her sister was “driving at;” but then, as Joanna looked hurt, and as Arthur’s mother could not even yet forget all she owed to this fearless and devoted girl, she sat down for a minute, and suffered her hand to remain in Joanna’s tender clasp.

“Dear Georgina, I cannot help speaking this once, now that we are about to part—it may be for ever in the present world. I really cannot help saying how deeply and truly I have grieved to watch in you the gradual decay of those feelings and impressions which seemed to be leading you to an anchorage of peace and safety. You *will* forgive me for reminding you that there was a time when you acknowledged that nothing here could satisfy the cravings of your heart, when you asked only for a quiet, patient mind, which should enable you to acquiesce in whatever

might be before you. Is not all this true, Georgina? ”

“Quite true, my dear Jo,” sighed the married lady, beginning to look uncomfortable, and to wish monsieur might grow impatient, and send for her; “but what’s the good of talking of it now? I really felt all I professed to do at the time you are alluding to, and I don’t see that I have done anything so outrageously wicked in securing a respectable home for myself. I could not have lived for ever dependent on Edgar Carlyon, and it’s not likely our father’s circumstances will ever much improve. I am not going to turn papist, Jo, because I have married a Frenchman. I am sure Monsieur Guinchard will never interfere with my religion in any way.”

It might have struck Joanna at the moment that no great forbearance would be required on Monsieur Guinchard’s part in abstaining from such interference; but she only looked sadly and sorrowfully into her elder sister’s face, as she replied—

"If you can love this man, Georgina, and do your duty by him, you may yet attain to the peace and rest I thought you had wilfully cast from you ; but you have put many difficulties in your own way by uniting yourself to one of a different faith—you have——"

"Oh, spare me any more, there's a dear child!" exclaimed the bride, rising hastily now, and giving every sign in her changing countenance of having had enough of it. "You are wrong, if not cruel, Jo, in speaking to me of loving this heavy, pompous, elderly foreigner, whose name I have thought fit to take. I will be a good wife to him, if I can ; but why *you*, who have obtained the substance, should prate of love to *me*, who must be content with something less than the shadow, I cannot even imagine. Now let me go."

There were real tears at last in the bright eyes that had so carefully preserved their clearness and their brightness till now, and poor Joanna, alarmed and distressed at the inference she was obliged to draw from this unlooked-for agitation,

could only cling round her sister and implore her to believe that all she had said had been prompted by the tenderest affection and anxiety.

“Well, well, I have no doubt of that,” was the hurried response; “you are a good girl, Jo, and I firmly believe you deserve all you have got and will appreciate it more, in the long run, than perhaps I should have done. I know I am an unstable being, and when Arthur was taken from me I became as a solitary leaf drifted hither and thither by every wind. That was the one strong and abiding love of my nature, Jo. Be content in this assurance, that concerning *no other* could I ever have answered for its duration. Kiss me now, dear, and pray for me sometimes. I have not forsaken you, Jo, though like Demas—you see I remember something of my Bible still—I have loved this present world.”

The eyes were quite dry and bright again when Madame Guinchard joined her husband and friends in the drawing-room. These light natures can shake off all ordinary emotion as they would

shake off an insect that was annoying them. The bride had spoken truly when she told her sister that the one strong passion of her nature had been her love for her boy. In his grave had been buried all the earnestness, all the unselfishness, all the better, higher feelings of every kind, of which Georgina Vining had been really capable. Georgina Guinchard will go through life either creditably, or discredibly as the circumstances around her shall decide; but whatever she may do or leave undone strong feeling will have no part in it—the pride, the vanity, the ambition of the woman may be touched and acted upon, but the heart has become still and dumb, and can never even ache again, except when memory, at rare intervals, brings before the gay and fashionable lady's eyes a little grass grown grave in the churchyard at Bayswater.

CHAPTER IV.

POOR LILLIE'S NEW TRIAL.

Mrs. WILMOTT spent a couple of quiet, peaceful days with her sisters, after the departure of the bride; and then there came a startling and unexpected order from her tyrant to pack up everything immediately, and join him in a small town from which he wrote, very near to Marseilles. Money was enclosed for all necessary expenses, but a command added that Lillie was to be very careful how she spent it, and not to pay away a single sou that could be avoided. Mr. Richard stated that he was doing very well where he was, and that, with a little prudence now, he

should be able to settle all claims against him in time.

As Lillie showed this letter to her sisters, and Elsie communicated its contents to her husband, Mrs. Wilmot was not allowed to leave Versailles without a full discharge from all the tradespeople there in respect of the money that had been owing to them by the unscrupulous Mr. Dick.

"I am doing you no favor, my dear Mrs. Wilmot," Edgar said, when poor sensitive Lillie was protesting, with tears, against her brother-in-law's generosity. "I am only performing an act of justice for my own gratification. I should not, believe me, have taken the liberty of offering you money for your own use, but with these people who would suffer through your husband you have nothing to do. I sincerely regret that circumstances should stand in the way of our serving you more effectually."

It was a really terrible parting between poor Lillie and her sisters. Now, indeed, they felt that they were losing her in all probability for ever,

and the thought that she was henceforth to be entirely removed from them, and at the mercy of a man who was sinking daily lower and lower both in the moral and in the social scale, filled them with a gloom that neither the bright prospects of the one, nor the depressing circumstances of the other, in any way assisted to mitigate.

As for Lillie herself, though she tried the hardest to conceal her emotions, the courage and patience she had so long exhibited seemed, to her own apprehension, to have died out for ever now. All her past trials dwindled into insignificance as she pictured the new life amongst total strangers, the life into which no word of love, no look of sympathy should enter, and in which she might have to encounter difficulties and tribulations as yet undreamt of, in connection with the husband she had resolved never to abandon.

Very little, however, of all that was in her aching heart did she communicate on that parting day to the sisters, who needed not her sorrow to add to their own. But, seeing that she was in

that state wherein total silence becomes the only refuge from violent and demonstrative grief, Joanna sought very tenderly and soothingly to administer consolation in the way she herself best understood that precious word.

She spoke of the comparative briefness of all earthly sufferings as well as of all earthly partings, and drew a calm, fair picture of the heavenly home where those who, having suffered in the flesh and ceased from sin, should rest at last from their labours and their crying.

"Oh, don't, Joanna, please," said Elsie, noticing the quivering of poor Lillie's pale lip and thinking that this sort of talk was only agitating her more; "she cannot bear it to-day."

"Yes," answered Lillie, abruptly, "I can bear it better than anything else. I like to be reminded now that there is something coming after this present life. I have got the little book you gave me, Jo, and I have read it more than once lately. God knows I am still wicked enough, but I don't somehow feel so far from Him as I

used to feel. My darlings," she added, with a sudden passion of tears, the fiercer that they had been so long back, and throwing an arm round each of her sisters, "my darlings, I *could not* lose you, without my heartstrings breaking, if I did not believe that one day we shall all meet up there in that calm heaven. Now for one last good kiss, and then—no farewells, but courage and patience for me; and for you, my precious ones! hope and belief, still, in my unlimited capabilities of endurance."

Through their blinding tears Joanna and Elsie could see that Lillie was trying with all her might to make her last look a smile, as she took her seat in the uncomfortable diligence beside Louise (who was still to remain in her service) and opposite to her faithful friend, Mr. Carus Cheviot, who had eagerly begged permission to bear her company for, at least, the first half of her melancholy journey.

Upon Elsie this sudden departure of poor Lillie from amongst them fell as a double loss.

There was the real pain of being deprived of a sister she dearly loved, and there was the abrupt withdrawal of a strong interest which, at any rate for the time Lillie had been with her, had helped her not only in concealing but to some extent in forgetting her own individual sorrow. Now that Lillie was gone, and that Joanna was so soon going too, there seemed nothing for this hapless little woman but to nurse her dreary misery till it should utterly consume the life that had really become more than distasteful to her, since she had learned to doubt, without having courage to question, the husband she was still compelled to love.

As long as Joanna remained her guest and constant companion, Elsie, taking example from poor Lillie, struggled bravely against any outward manifestations of the depression which she knew to be taking daily a surer and a more tenacious hold of her. She could not endure the idea that this beloved sister should enter upon her own life of calm and blessed sunshine with any sus-

picion concerning herself that might hereafter fall as a shadow over that brightness. Elsie, in her ignorance of her own nature, conscientiously believed that for the sake of those who loved her and would be made wretched by her wretchedness, she could go on enduring silently to the end, and, dying early, let her unhappy secret die with her.

Physically she was growing so weak from the incessant fever of the mind that it was natural enough she should look forward to death as a probable and speedy termination to her sufferings, as the only rational answer to the wearying question of *how* she was to bear them that in the beginning had been for ever recurring.

Mr. Carlyon, no doubt with a kind motive, left the sisters very much to themselves during the last few days of their being together. It had occurred to him once or twice lately that there was more in Elsie's mental depression than even her presumed state of health could altogether account for, and though when he hinted as much

to his father, the latter assured him that it was the commonest thing in the world for continued lowness of spirits to accompany the kind of indisposition Mrs. Edgar was suffering from, the husband remained partly unconvinced but cherishing a hope that to her favorite sister, Elsie might, on the eve of their parting, open her heart concerning anything that was weighing upon it.

Had he yielded to his own wishes he would long ago have summoned the first medical men in Paris to pronounce upon his wife's case, but Elsie hated doctors, and the very thought of being asked to see one now, threw her into such a fever of irritation that Edgar, always with the conviction instilled by Clarice in his mind, had given up the point and suffered her to go on in her own way.

He had a little serious talk with Joanna an evening or two before she was to leave, and when Elsie had gone early to bed with one of her now frequently recurring headaches. He said he blamed himself for not having insisted on medical

advice sooner—that he was far from satisfied as to the state of his wife's health, and that he had now quite resolved on taking her somewhere for change of air as soon as he returned from escorting his sister-in-law to the English port where Felix had promised to meet her.

In reply to all this, Joanna admitted that she considered Elsie far from well, but added that Elsie herself had never acknowledged either to illness (except those occasional headaches) or to depression from any positive cause. She had no doubt felt Lillie's going away very much, and would feel the parting from her (Joanna) acutely for a time; but if all their hopes and expectations in reference to her present condition were realized, the elder sister confidently believed she would recover health and spirits, and give no further anxiety to any of them.

“It may be so;” said Edgar thoughtfully—(it must be remembered that he was not just now, like Joanna, a dweller in the land where everything is tinted with the rainbow hues of hope)—

"but I cannot forget that long and mysterious illness of her girlhood, which it seems to me so little would bring back upon her again. I should be much less anxious but for this."

"Yet," urged Joanna, "you know Elsie had quite got over that illness some time previous to your seeing her, and all the doctors whom we consulted then, were of opinion that with an easy, happy life, there would be no fear of its returning. She is not very likely, with you to watch over her, to be exposed to any trial of a sufficiently formidable nature to shake her constitution again. Her mind is elastic, and would rise easily from the pressure of all ordinary calamities. I do not say that any extraordinary tribulation that was new to her, any severe shock to the mind would not kill her, for I believe it would—but why should we anticipate so much evil for one who seems born to live only in the warmest sunshine? My pretty Elsie! my tender darling!" added this loving elder sister, speaking more to herself just now than to her companion; "my heart

grows cold in only imagining the possibility of killing grief coming to one like you."

Mr. Carlyon was not made a great deal easier by this conversation with his wife's sister. His nature was not a very hopeful one, and the reserve which formed a part of that nature kept him in many instances from even seeking the comfort that might in fact have been obtainable. He could not bring himself to talk openly to Elsie of his fears and anxiety about her; the moment her evident shrinking from the subject forced itself upon him he retired, if not into his ice armour, at least into an entrenchment of pride and shyness that to one who was predisposed to suspicion might well be mistaken for coldness and indifference.

The same night on which he had talked with Joanna, Edgar, finding his wife awake when he went upstairs, spoke to her of his plan of going somewhere with her for change of air, and enquired if she should like it.

"Oh yes," Elsie replied; and in her inmost

heart she was conscious of a throb of pleasure at the thought of having her husband quite away from Versailles; but ever since coming to bed there had floated before her sleepless eyes that radiant vision which her very soul abhorred, and she could not help answering her husband in a tone that chilled him instantly.

Nevertheless he would not quite leave the subject of her indisposition, and after a few remarks concerning the comparative healthiness of half a dozen places he named, Mr. Carlyon said abruptly—

“By the bye, Elsie, you must choose amongst your friends whom you would like to invite to stay with you during the two or three days I shall be absent. In your state, my love, I cannot think of leaving you alone.”

Then Elsie lifted her flushed face from the pillow, and spoke decidedly—

“I will not have anybody, Edgar, thank you. I should detest having anybody. The house is full of servants, and I suppose I am old enough to

take care of myself. Indeed, indeed I would a thousand times rather be left alone."

"Don't thwart her in so simple a whim as that," said Mr. Carlyon senior, when as usual he was appealed to in the matter. "No harm can possibly come to her in those few days, during which you may be sure I shall go round and look after the young lady continually."

So Edgar, somewhat against his own judgment, yielded this point also, and Elsie, really grateful at his concession, made unusual efforts to keep up her spirits, and to bear the parting from Joanna bravely.

CHAPTER V.

MR. CARLYON'S LITTLE LECTURE.

MR. CARLYON senior was rather glad upon the whole that his daughter-in-law had resisted the plan suggested by her husband of having a friend to stay with her during her brief loneliness. The old gentleman thought it would be an excellent opportunity for him to bestow upon her one of those little quiet lectures on her conjugal duties, which he seemed really to take especial pleasure in giving, but which hitherto Elsie had received without any extravagant amount of gratitude.

So, after accompanying the travellers to their place of starting, and reiterating his promise to

Edgar to look well after Mistress Elsie, he walked slowly back to his daughter-in-law's house with the kind intention of carrying her off to his own place to lunch.

"Madame is in the drawing-room and alone," said Clarice (whom he met in the hall), in answer to his enquiries; "but—shaking her head and looking very grave—she is devoured, poor lady! by grief and ennui. She ought to go out and amuse herself. Monsieur must try to comfort her."

"All right, all right!" replied the gentleman with an easy confidence in his own powers which, judging by the waiting-woman's face, she by no means shared. "I shall take her away with me now—you can be getting her walking dress ready."

Opening the door abruptly (Mr. Carlyon never suffered himself to be formally announced in his son's house), he discovered Elsie seated on the floor, her fair head resting on the broad back of her sleeping favourite, her hair in unwonted dis-

order, and something in her whole attitude and appearance suggestive not only of grief, but of grief in its most reckless and passionate abandonment.

A very different Elsie this to the one first introduced to the reader, though then it will be remembered she was seated on the floor of a handsomely furnished room, with her bright hair floating carelessly around her, and Hector for her sole companion. Two pictures of the one face and form, each telling its own history, with only the key wanting that should explain the process that had wrought that formidable difference.

“My dear child, what in the name of wonder is all this?” exclaimed Mr. Carlyon, as Elsie sprang up, on hearing his footstep, and stood, her face white and tear-stained, actually trembling before him. “I thought you assured Edgar that you should be quite happy and comfortable while he was away. Has anything happened?”

“No,” said poor Elsie, struggling hard, but ineffectually as yet, with her quickly falling tears.

"Nothing at all has happened, sir, only I felt dull and low spirited, and I could not help crying—it does me good. Please don't notice me. I shall be much better presently."

Mr. Carlyon was not hard-hearted by any means, so he took a seat on the sofa, nearest to where he had found his daughter-in-law, and waited with tolerable patience till her composure returned to her.

When Elsie, having swallowed a glass of water that had been standing on a table beside her, and smoothed her tumbled hair at one of the mirrors, came with a somewhat cleared though still pale and agitated countenance, and offered her hand to her father-in-law, the latter rose, placed her at the upper end of the sofa (not without a certain degree of tenderness, for she was such a little helpless, fragile looking thing in her misery, that no man on earth could have been harsh with her), and then sat down again himself in a chair which he fetched and planted exactly in front of her.

"Now, my dear child," he began, "this is all

very well, or perhaps I should say very natural, as far as it has gone—I allude of course to your strangely depressed spirits, Elsie; but indeed, indeed it must not go any farther. I came here this morning with two definite objects, one being to take you home to luncheon with me, and the other to speak to you kindly, but very seriously, concerning that distressing mental state which for some time past has been growing upon you, and which is causing your husband—and no doubt your other friends as well—so much anxiety. Don't you think now, that with a little exercise of resolution, you might struggle successfully against it?"

"Indeed I have done my best," replied Elsie, terribly afraid from the sensation in her throat that she should begin crying again—"but nobody can do impossibilities, can they. I can't help being depressed any more than I could help being ill all those years before I was married; and as my depression doesn't hurt any one except myself,"—she added, her spirit rising suddenly against what

she considered the cruelty of this fault-finding, just when she was most lonely and wretched, "I don't see why I should be blamed or worried about the matter. I don't complain. I only ask to be let alone."

This being the very boldest speech Elsie had ever made to her father-in-law, and the countenance of that dignitary expressing unqualified astonishment, the poor little girl's courage and spirit entirely vanished the moment the words were out of her mouth. The flush that dyed her hitherto white face, the lids that drooped suddenly over her glistening eyes, and the increased trembling of the nervous hands she had been clasping and unclasping all the time, sufficiently testified to the fact of her being alarmed at her own temerity. Mr. Carlyon saw this, and, seeing it, could afford to be magnanimous and indulgent.

"Elsie," he said—"you are excited just now, and therefore I pass over without remark the strange want of respect to me, your husband's father, which you have betrayed in that last angry

speech. To the speech itself I must, however, reply. You affirmed that your long continued dejection could hurt nobody but yourself. My dear, this was surely most heedlessly or most ignorantly spoken. In the first place, it hurts your husband and all interested in you; in the second place—and this, remember, is of the most vital importance—it may very seriously hurt the child to whose coming we are looking forward with such unspeakable pleasure and gladness.”

Interpreting in his own way the crimson heat that overspread Elsie's face for a moment, and then left it whiter than before, as he gave utterance to his concluding observation, Mr. Carlyon took her hand very gently, and hastened to add in his most soothing voice—

“My dear child, I did not mean to agitate or offend you. I am an old man, and standing to you in the relation I do, there is nothing remarkable in what I have been saying. I assure you, Edgar would be happier than he has ever been in his life, in the prospect of becoming a

father, were he not so anxious about your health and spirits."

Elsie withdrew her hand rather abruptly from Mr. Carlyon's friendly hold, and her lip quivered visibly as she asked—

"Does Edgar think that my depression, my state of health generally, may affect the—the—"

But she could not get out the word she wanted; that something in the throat rose up and seemed as if it was choking her.

"Your future infant, my love," supplied her now gracious and pitying companion (for although her extreme bashfulness was incomprehensible to him, he could be really sorry for her on account of it). "Yes, certainly he does; he would be marvellously ignorant if he did not know it as a fact. You can understand, therefore, Elsie, how very keen is his anxiety about you, and how very plainly it becomes your duty to rouse yourself and shake off the gloom which I cannot but think you have hitherto been rather encouraging."

"Yes," said Elsie, drawing in her lips, and speaking in a dry, constrained tone that more and more mystified her father-in law. "I can understand everything, and perhaps, as you tell me it is my duty, I may be able to please my husband better for the time to come. Oh, dear," she added, suddenly lifting her hand to her forehead and keeping it tightly pressed there. "I have my old pain coming on here, and it is bewildering me so that I don't know what I am saying. Will you be so kind as to excuse me, and let me go to bed?"

She looked unmistakeably ill as well as unmistakeably wretched. Mr. Carlyon must have felt that he had bungled terribly in his efforts to cheer and console his poor little solitary daughter-in-law. But unwilling to give the matter up yet, he said he believed the fresh air would be better for her than lying down, and that he wanted her very much to return and have lunch at his rooms.

"I cannot indeed," Elsie answered positively.

"I must go to bed at once. To-morrow I will do what you like, only let me have rest and quiet for to-day. It is all I ask, sir."

"To-morrow, young lady, you shall have a doctor, whether you like it or not," was the silent resolve of the puzzled and defeated old gentleman, as he rang the bell for Clarice to attend her mistress upstairs, and went home to eat his luncheon alone.

CHAPTER VI.

A WIFE TAKING EXAMPLE FROM MRS. BLUEBEARD.

SOMETHING that Edgar had said to his wife just at the moment of leaving her, had roused Elsie for the first time, to a consciousness of the exceeding wrong she had been doing him in allowing his impressions concerning the origin of her illness to remain uncontradicted. It may seem scarcely natural that so very obvious a fact should not have forced itself upon her consideration before, but it must be remembered that any mind dwelling perpetually on a single thought, and that thought one of torture, loses in a great measure its faculty of clear perception as regards

all other matters. Ever since the receipt of that mysterious letter, and Elsie's involuntary association of its contents with certain previous, though slumbering doubts, she had been in a wholly unhealthy, and therefore wholly unreasoning mental condition. She had thought and felt enough, as it seemed to her, for a lifetime; but thinking and feeling, under special circumstances, become hindrances rather than helps to the vigorous exercise of the understanding; and so at last poor Elsie had grown in her uncommunicated misery and fear, dull and almost senseless concerning anything and everything that did not immediately relate to the one cruel, gnawing pain which never let go its hold upon her heart.

But it so happened that a few simple words—Edgar's words, as he was saying good bye to her—suddenly and startlingly revealed to Elsie the great and unpardonable error she had committed in suffering her husband to cherish hopes she had no idea would ever be realised. She had for some time, indeed, known as a fact that

he had a passionate longing for children. His father had told her as much, and her own subsequent observation had confirmed it; but somehow, it had never until now fastened itself as a serious conviction upon her mind, and the light so abruptly let in was a light that alarmed rather than gladdened her.

The moment Edgar was gone, Elsie would have given worlds to have recalled him and acknowledged the truth—nay, she even felt that had a few more minutes been granted her, she could have summoned courage to tell him everything, to lay bare to his gaze her wounded, aching heart, and implore him to pity and forgive her.

He had been so kind and tender in those last parting moments, had seemed so grieved to leave his little drooping wife alone, that Elsie's mind had once more nearly succeeded in throwing off its deadly weight, and in believing, through all opposing evidence, in her husband's truth and loyalty.

But in proportion as the tendency to this re-

covered confidence predominated, so did her apprehensions increase concerning the deceit she had unthinkingly practised upon him, just to avoid the annoyance and difficulty of being questioned about her lowness of spirits.

It was the pressure of all these conflicting emotions that had thrown Elsie into that paroxysm of grief and despair in which her father-in-law had that morning surprised her.

His really innocent admission, in the midst of his well-meant little lecture, that Edgar agreed with him in considering her present state of health, bodily and mental, prejudicial to that other life she was supposed to bear within her own, had created a second revulsion of feeling in the tempest-tossed soul of this truly miserable little woman.

She had said she understood it all now, by which incomprehensible words—incomprehensible at least to her hearer—she meant that she understood all her husband's anxiety about her, all his care, all his professed tenderness.

Not for her own sake, but because on her life depended the life which would be so infinitely more precious to him had Edgar sought to make her happy, to keep her mind at rest, to scare away all shadows from her pathway, to give her the semblance of an affection he knew she hungered for, even as for her daily bread, but the reality of which was bestowed upon another.

"A young and lovely woman;—" but as those terribly familiar and hateful words out of that horrible letter, again, with their cruel persistency, recurred to her, and as their inevitable accompaniment, the radiant vision, floated into the air above her head, Elsie, thoroughly worn out in body and half maddened in mind, uttered an involuntary scream of terror, and clenched her trembling hand defiantly and threateningly at the fair, smiling shadow, which in that moment of frenzied excitement she recognized as a living, breathing enemy, stationed there to mock at her despair.

Will any one say that only a mad woman could

so have done, could so have felt? I am not prepared to assert otherwise, for I believe firmly that the incessant circling of even the strongest mind round one object, especially an object of loathing or fear, does produce a mental distortion which is none the less real because it is partial and exclusive.

"Is madame worse; is she in great pain, or has she had a bad dream?" asked Clarice, who, unknown to her young mistress, had been sitting with her work at the foot of the bed ever since she had placed Elsie upon it.

"Oh," exclaimed Mrs. Carlyon, still shaking all over, and looking wilder than her really distressed attendant had ever seen her look, "I am in terrible pain, Clarice, and I think I must have had a horrible dream too. What are you doing here?"

"Only watching near madame, in case she should require anything. Indeed I do not consider madame fit to be left alone. I wish monsieur was not away."

"I will have some tea and then get up," said Elsie, whose nerves were in that intensely irritable state when the very idea of being watched, however tenderly (and she knew Clarice was attached to her), becomes absolute torture. "Go and prepare it for me quickly, and see that no visitors are admitted to-day. Mr. Carlyon made my head ten times worse than it was before—oh please do go at once, Clarice."

For the girl, with all her experience amongst fine ladies whose nerves and tempers were excitable, had never seen anyone as Elsie was now, and she really only spoke as she felt when she said her mistress was not fit to be left alone.

Nevertheless, on this second appeal, she had no choice but to obey the order as quickly as possible, but Elsie had scarcely crushed her poor throbbing head into her down pillow again, with an acute sense of relief at being alone, when the zealous Clarice reappeared, bringing a cup of strong green tea (not a very sensible remedy, by the bye, for nervous headache) and on the tray

beside it several visiting cards that had just been left, and a little note addressed to Mrs. Edgar Carlyon in the elder Mr. Carlyon's handwriting.

Pushing this from her with a gesture of impatience, and not even noticing the cards, Elsie drank off her tea eagerly, and then told Clarice to return in half an hour to dress her.

It was not until that ceremony—a very brief one to-day—was concluded, and the lady once more left to herself with books and writing materials that she had asked for, without expecting to be able to use, that the note from her father-in-law accidentally caught her eye.

“It must be read, I suppose,” was Elsie's mental comment as she tore off the envelope, and gathered with difficulty, on account of the increasing bewilderment of her tired brain, the sense of the following.

“I write these few lines, my dear Elsie, not to reproach you with the pain you, possibly un-

consciously, inflicted on me this morning, and which I think it my duty, under the circumstances, freely to forgive, but simply to warn you that I intend bringing my old and esteemed friend Dr. Martyn to see you, and report upon your case to-morrow. I am not unacquainted with your prejudice against all doctors in connection with yourself, but, my dear child, you must remember that Edgar left you under my especial charge, and when I add that from my observations of to-day I consider immediate medical advice most important, both for yourself and your eagerly looked for infant, I am sure you will put no obstacle in the way of my desires on the subject. Be at home about twelve o'clock, and after the interview I will take you back to luncheon with me, since I was disappointed of your society to-day. Trusting your headache has left you,

“ I am, my dear Elsie,

“ Always your affectionate father,

“ R. C.”

And what were Elsie's feelings as she read this unequivocally paternal epistle? Certainly not the mildly acquiescent ones the writer had chosen to assume as probable. See a doctor she could not, and would not. Besides, why should Mr. Carlyon take upon himself to insist upon a point her husband had given up for the present? What right had this meddling old man to exert authority over her at all? At any other time, Elsie was sure she should have been extremely indignant at the letter she had received.

Now, in the excited state of her mind and nerves, it affected her comparatively little, and in throwing it aside her only thought in connection with it was that she must devise some plan, between to-day and to-morrow at twelve, for escaping from the threatened interview with Dr. Martyn.

Suddenly, as she sat pondering and resting her still fiercely throbbing head upon her hands, a lucky idea occurred to her. Some short time ago, when her husband had been first anxious for her

to have medical advice, he had named a rising physician, whose practice having commenced in the provincial towns, still obliged him to be frequently absent from the capital. Elsie could not remember this gentleman's name, but she had a vague notion that Edgar had once shown her his card which he had taken out of, and afterwards replaced, in his own desk—the desk that was standing now on a table of the room in which Elsie was sitting. If she could find this card, and send it to her father-in-law, telling him that Edgar would prefer her seeing that doctor to any other, it would, at least, occasion a delay in her seeing any at all, as the one in question was nearly sure to be out of Paris—and so she should gain time, and, perhaps, courage, to make her confession to Edgar himself, who, if he could pardon the deceit she had been guilty of, in consideration of the great sorrow of heart which had led to it, would be more likely to do so on her voluntary acknowledgment of the wrong, than if the revelation of it came to him through any other channel.

It is true that Elsie had never yet opened her husband's desk, that she did not know whether he would approve of her taking so much upon herself in his absence. It is true also that the very thought of looking into a place which might contain private papers and letters sent a cold shudder through her frame, and made her heart beat violently. What if she found there any absolute proofs of that terrible thing which even as a strong suspicion was rapidly destroying her? What if a single envelope met her eye, addressed in a delicate feminine handwriting to her husband?

Elsie's colour went and came in quick succession, and the wild throbbing of every nerve in her body increased, as these thoughts were suggested to her feverish mind, and so suggested that there came a species of mad fascination with them, which the poor little wife had neither the strength just now, nor, perhaps, the will, to struggle against.

"I *must* look," she said at last, getting up and

beginning to pace the room in another frenzy of excitement similar to the one which Clarice had recently interrupted. "I cannot bear a moment longer this agony of doubt. I *will* know the worst at once, and then if it *is* the worst—"

She could not get beyond this, even in imagination; but the impulse that already wholly possessed her—setting reason and prudence at defiance—carried her recklessly along till she had found amongst her own patent keys the fellow to the one belonging to her husband's desk, had fitted it into the lock (though her trembling fingers rendered this no easy task), had turned it, lifted the lid of the box, and was standing with white face and dilated eyes, positively afraid, while still resolved, to pursue the matter further.

Poor little foolish, short sighted Elsie! She should have remembered the obvious moral conveyed in the nursery story of Bluebeard's last wife; whose curiosity on the subject of the one forbidden chamber was punished in such a ghastly manner.

Mr. Edgar Carlyon was certainly no Bluebeard ; and yet there was that in his desk which it would have been well for his wife never to have seen, which, indeed, filled her timid soul with far greater terror and loathing than did all those murdered ladies, suspended round the wall, the soul of the startled Mrs. Bluebeard.

CHAPTER VII.

THE IVORY MINIATURE.

YET, strange to say, what Elsie found was only the portrait, in a morocco case at the bottom of her husband's desk, of a very young and very lovely woman. Perhaps no wife (however little prone to jealousy) would have been altogether enchanted at such an accidental discovery, and taking half a dozen women, there might be some interest in speculating as to what different results might have followed in each case, according to the different natures and temperaments of the individuals. No doubt in *all* the minds of the injured ladies there would be strong curiosity,

fierce indignation, and a resolution to get at the truth *somehow*, immediately developed. But in the discovery as made by Elsie Carlyon there was an element which rendered it infinitely more startling, as well as infinitely more bitter than without this element it would have been.

She instantly recognized the face looking and smiling so serenely at her from that unconscious bit of ivory. It was the face, younger and fairer indeed, but still unmistakeably the same, that had lived so freshly in the young girl's memory ever since she had seen the owner of it one summer's day in her brother's surgery at Bayswater.

In the first shock of this astonishing recognition, Elsie's mind seemed to lose all power of connecting facts or circumstances that might be brought to bear upon it. The only thing quite clear to her was the identification of the radiant creature she was now gazing at with the floating vision that had appeared to be moulded out of the atmosphere surrounding her, any time during

the last few miserable weeks when her imagination was sufficiently excited to favour such an illusion; and as a natural sequence to this identification that of the lady at Versailles,—the actual living, breathing woman whom Edgar visited in secret—with both the fair representations, which never alike till now, were equally familiar to Elsie's mental eye.

But by slow degrees there came helps from memory and reflection—quickenings as they were to a torturing acuteness by that passion which inspiration has declared to be “cruel as the grave”—in the process of getting at the truth of the matter, and the result of all was this.

The lady at Versailles, the original of that lovely picture, was the missing cousin, Edgar's love, perhaps his real wife—anyhow, (and here came the drop that made the bitter cup overflow, the deadliest element in all that deadly mixture) a woman who must have possessed his heart *before* he made a false show of giving it to Elsie, leaving to her the inevitable conclusion that she had

never been really loved by her husband at all. It is true that she had occasionally, when witnessing the manner in which James Oliver expressed his devotion to Joanna, felt repiningly that it was a higher order of devotion than her husband had ever bestowed upon her, but still Elsie had always hitherto clung to the belief that Edgar had, at the time of their marriage, loved her as fondly as he was capable of loving, and at any rate that no other woman had been before her in his heart.

Now that this last poor refuge from utter despair and humiliation was torn from her, she stood, in her mute anguish, stripped and shivering in a lonely world.

Is any woman who will read poor little Elsie's history blessed enough not to know what it is to find oneself—sometimes suddenly—thus standing, stripped and shivering, in a lonely world! not to know the sensation of awaking abruptly to the conviction that life must henceforth be so heavy a burden that if we are bidden to support it at

all, we must walk on wearily, heavily, and grave-sick till the end come!

No doubt there are a few women, strong-minded and philosophical, who, however keenly they might feel the first shock of such an awakening, would lift their heads bravely after it, and go on by and bye, with their life's work and duties, almost as if nothing had happened. But Elsie Carlyon was not a woman of this kind.

The one trial had fallen upon her, which perhaps of all others—certainly she thought so—her weak shoulders were the least able to bear. "Anything but this," is indeed the wailing cry of nearly every human heart under the immediate pressure of calamity; but I think if any one form of mental torture can, above another, justify that passionate cry, it is the conviction, in a loving woman's mind, that the faith and love she wholly trusted have either never existed, or been transferred to a rival who, through sin, and shame, and disloyalty, is honoured above herself.

Elsie would have had a thousand difficulties to

overcome had she been calm enough to go into the whole matter logically, and reason it out from the beginning to the end. She would have had to account for the strange fact of Edgar Carlyon wishing to marry her at all, with a prior attachment closing his heart against her. She would have had also to account for his decoying away from her friends, and keeping or marrying in secret, a lady whom he might have made his wife openly, and whose near relationship to himself almost forbade the possibility of his injuring.

But when was a jealous woman ever calm enough to reason? How could a wife nearly maddened already by weeks of cruel suspicion, be even expected to reason, holding in her hand that fair, smiling picture, and remembering where she had found it.

The summer twilight had wrapped half the room in shadow, and a cool wind was blowing in through the open windows, before Elsie roused herself in any degree from the train of anguished feeling—it could scarcely be called thought—

which that fatal miniature had suggested. Then shivering, physically as well as mentally, she dragged herself to the windows, and closed them as well as her shaking limbs would permit, replaced the portrait in the desk, locked it carefully, and finally took out writing materials from her own case, and began eagerly and rapidly to fill the paper before her.

Clarice came in to summon her mistress to dinner long before the task was completed, but Elsie ordered a little soup and wine to be brought up to her, partook sparingly of both, and then resumed her labours.

It took her quite two hours—so weak and ill she was—to get to the end of this unusually formidable writing, and when at length it was accomplished, the writer was too exhausted for awhile to set about the other work which still she was bound, before taking rest that night, to perform.

We will not watch her movements any farther at present; it is cruel sport at best to look too

closely at poor frail humanity in its extremity of suffering. But that blotted, tear-stained letter lying yet open, and with its ink undried, upon Elsie's table, we will venture pityingly to read. Here it is :—

“The terrible time has come, Edgar, which, in our happiest days, we jested about as the wildest impossibility—do you remember?—the terrible time when I am going to leave you voluntarily, and in so doing, to surround my life with the thickest darkness for ever. One comfort, indeed, I have—my only one—and that is that I shall very soon die, and forget the great, great misery, I have no strength to live and bear. I am not writing this letter to reproach you. Ever since the dreadful truth that I was nothing to you, except in name, has been familiar to me, I have felt far less anger than bitter, cruel sorrow ; and even now, when a strange accident has revealed to me that you never could have loved me, that from the very first you must have

deceived me, I cannot bring myself to regard you as most wives, I suppose, under the same circumstances would regard their husbands. Dear Edgar, it is my greatest misfortune to love you still, in spite of all; but I cannot stay with you and hide this agony of mind, and if I let you see it and understand its source, you would, perhaps, take from me that measure of compassionate tenderness which I do believe you have hitherto bestowed upon the poor little wife who so loved and trusted you. But there is yet another reason why I am leaving you, Edgar. I have a confession to make that I could not make while we were under the same roof, because I could not—now particularly when I know that you never really loved me—endure to witness the anger and indignation you *must* feel against me on learning what I have to tell. The reason you have so long been assigning for my ill health and lowness of spirits, which I have permitted you to assign, is not a true one, and I knew it was not. But I saw that it satisfied your mind as to whatever

appeared unaccountable in my manner or conduct; and, not wanting to be questioned, I let you think your own thoughts, and gladly and thankfully—oh, so thankfully, Edgar—accepted the additional care and tenderness I gained thereby. I know now how wrong and inexcusable I have been, and I can quite imagine how grave my fault will appear in your eyes; but I have been half mad ever since I found out your secret, and it would have been so hard to give up all love and care and petting at once. Now, indeed, I am giving them up for ever; but, alas! it is because I have no choice. I could not stay, dear Edgar, to *see* them withdrawn from me; I could not bear your anger in addition to your indifference. Perhaps you will be more angry with me for leaving you in this way. I do not know—my brain is not very clear to-night. I think I remember your saying once that a wife ought, under all circumstances, to cling to her husband, but could these circumstances include the knowledge, not only of her having a rival in his affec-

tions, but of that rival having been before her in her husband's heart? Edgar, I have just said that my brain is not quite clear to-night—utter misery is confusing it strangely, and so you must forgive me if I write things that will strike you as the ravings of a mad person, if I tell you that the overwhelming thought has occurred to me that perhaps I am not your real wife after all. I saw that beautiful woman once in England, and I could have staked my life upon the fact of her purity and goodness. Would she receive your secret visits if she were not your lawful wife; and if she is—oh, Edgar, what am I? and why did you seek me, and go through the solemn ceremony of marriage with me? The more I try to understand any part of this terrible affair, the more my brain grows bewildered, and my heart sick and weary. I think if you were beside me at this moment, I could lay my throbbing head upon your shoulder, and speak out all my maddening thoughts, and then (if you would hold me in your arms and pity me while you told

the tale), that I could bear to hear from your lips the whole truth from the beginning—it would kill me, I know ; but then I should die with my husband near me, and with his voice—the voice that has never spoken a harsh word to me—sounding kindly and soothingly in my ear. But I have not courage to *wait* for this consolation, Edgar. Waiting here, in the house where I was once so perfectly happy and blessed, might drive me to some desperate act that would banish me from paradise in the next world, as surely as I have been banished from it in this. Don't be anxious or uneasy about my future fate, Edgar. I shall go at once to my brother in England, and he will take care of me till my mind is clearer and calmer, and I can think for myself what it will be best for me to do. I must leave my poor Hector in your charge for the present. You will not kill him, as you once said you would if he brought you news of my flight. He will not do that, Edgar, and so I know that you will be kind to him for my sake.

“And now farewell, dear, dear Edgar, for strength and heart are fast failing me, and I must spare them if I can for what I have still to do. That God may bless, and shield, and guide you—that he may forgive you if you have wronged me *even to the uttermost*, is the earnest prayer of

“Your still loving, heartbroken

“ELSIE.”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HUSBAND'S RETURN.

FROM the moment of saying good bye to his wife, Edgar Carlyon felt that he had done an unwise thing in leaving her at home alone. Her pale, sad, wistful face as he had last seen it looking after him and Joanna from the breakfast-room window, haunted him continually, and made him anything but a lively or entertaining companion to his sister-in-law. Fortunately for Joanna, her own thoughts had sufficient brightness in them to render it a matter of indifference that her escort seemed to prefer silence during the greater part of their journey; for although Edgar might have found relief in speaking to his wife's sister on the

subject that was distressing his own mind, he was so little accustomed to depend upon those around him for sympathy, so wedded to his long standing habits of reserve and uncommunicativeness, that he never once obtruded upon his quiet companion the harassing thoughts which went with him all the way. She saw that he was greatly relieved when the time came for him to resign her to the care of a lady slightly known to her at Dover, with whom she was to remain until Felix could come to escort her the remaining half of the journey.

“He is so anxious to get back to poor little Elsie,” was Joanna’s natural and comforting reflection; and her last words, as they wished each other an affectionate good bye, were—“I know you will take every possible care of my darling, and never forget what a tender, fragile plant, you have pledged yourself to watch over.”

“I ought to be watching over her now,” Mr. Carlyon replied; and Joanna understood that he meant this as a sort of apology for the eagerness

he could not help manifesting to be leaving Dover, and turning his steps homeward.

He had only been away three days altogether, but it seemed double that time to Edgar, as the mail post in which he had travelled rattled noisily at length over the rough stones of Paris, and deposited him in the grey dawn of a summer's morning within an easy walk of his own dwelling.

He knew he was not expected till quite the middle of that day, for he had said nothing about returning by a more rapid conveyance than the ordinary diligence; and as he walked now leisurely up the *Champs Elysées*, this anxious and affectionate husband pleased himself by picturing the joyful surprise his little Elsie would exhibit on his abrupt entrance into her room.

It was nearly seven o'clock by the time Edgar came within sight of his home, and he was certain of finding some of the servants about if he sought admittance; but recollecting that his father was always an early riser, and that his

apartments were close at hand, he abruptly changed his course, and determined to go and ask the old gentleman for a cup of coffee and a bath.

Mr. Carlyon, senior, had, throughout his whole life, counted it a sin to remain in bed after six o'clock. Most of his early success he attributed to the habit he had contracted when a boy of rising with the lark, and doing a good portion of his day's work before breakfast. In his old age, although he had no special work to do, he still kept up the custom of his youth and manhood; and nothing but positive illness was ever known to make him depart from it.

Great therefore was the astonishment of Mr. Edgar Carlyon when, on the morning in question, in answer to his enquiries of the servant who opened to him the door of his father's ante-room, he was informed that Monsieur was still in bed, and had not even rung for his first cup of *chocolât au lait*.

"Is my father ill, then?" said Edgar, passing

into the inner room and beginning to look somewhat anxious.

Not that the obsequious valet was aware of—but Monsieur had been out a great many times, *faisant des longues courses à la fois*, the previous day, and had appeared extremely fatigued when night came. Ah! that was Monsieur's bell at last. Would Monsieur Edgar be pleased to sit down and wait while he attended to its summons.

In very a few minutes the valet again presented himself before his master's early guest, with a message from the former to the effect that he should be glad to see his son in his bedroom immediately.

“For Heaven's sake what is it, sir,” exclaimed Edgar, as he went hurriedly in and approached the bed where his parent lay. “I am certain there is something wrong: indeed I have had a presentiment of it ever since I left home. Is my wife worse?”

“My dear Edgar,” replied the old gentleman,

sitting up and looking really flushed and agitated, "I am quite incapable of answering that question. Your wife is not at home; but take a chair, and I will tell you in a few words all I know about it. Do sit down, I beg of you, Edgar."

For heedless or unconscious of the invitation thus kindly extended to him, Edgar remained in a standing attitude, looking fixedly at Mr. Carlyon with slightly dilated eyes, and a face from which the usually healthy colour had wholly retreated.

"Not at home!" he said presently, in a voice that was evidently striving desperately for calmness. "I do not understand you, sir. I left her at home, and with a promise from you that you would look after her. Where is she, then?"

"I have no idea in the world, upon my honor and soul," returned the father, growing more excited as his son's hardly repressed agitation forced itself upon his notice. "Do you think if I had, I would not have told you at once, Edgar?"—

but I wish you would listen quietly to all I do know; *you* may be able to make something of it."

"I am prepared to listen quietly," said Edgar. And then he sat down, and with folded arms and eyes bent upon the ground avoided any further sign of the cruel impatience which the coldest man on earth must have felt under similar circumstances.

"I called upon Elsie the day you left," resumed Mr. Carlyon senior, "and found her not only crying her eyes out, but so evidently ill in body and fretful in spirits that I made up my mind I would bring a doctor to her the next morning. I wrote a note apprising her of my intention as soon as I got home, and late the same evening I received a few lines from her, thanking me, certainly, for my anxiety, but declaring that it was your wish, if she had a doctor at all, that she should have one you had heard highly spoken of, but whose name she could not remember. 'Do not therefore trouble

to bring your friend,' she added in her little note, which by the bye was written in a very scrawling and nearly illegible hand—'for I must really decline seeing him in Edgar's absence; and besides this, I shall not be at home any part of the day to-morrow.' I need scarcely tell you, Edgar, that I was both astonished and mortified at this independent sort of communication from my daughter-in-law, who I thought was treating me disrespectfully to say the very least of it—so I tore up her note and threw it in the waste paper basket (I wish I had kept it now), and resolved not to go near my lady again till she made the amende. I could not, you see——"

"For Heaven's sake tell me first where you think my wife is," interrupted the son at this point, his impatience and uneasiness getting the better of the deference he usually paid his father—"and afterwards I will hear what you please concerning her misconduct towards yourself. I knew I did wrong in leaving her."

"I am making all the haste I can with my

story, Edgar," said Mr. Carlyon, avoiding any show of offended dignity, partly out of genuine pity for his son, and partly from the consciousness of being in his night cap—"but I have one of those minds which necessitates order in the relation of facts of any description; and, after all, I know so little about this matter. I know only that when, hearing nothing of Mistress Elsie during all the day succeeding my first visit, I presented myself yesterday morning at her doors, intending simply to enquire concerning her health, I was struck nearly dumb by the information that she had left home two evenings ago, and had not returned since. Now pray calm yourself, Edgar, while I tell you the rest, for there may be nothing in it when we get at the truth. I sent for Clarice and heard from her that her mistress had continued in a very excited state all the afternoon of the day on which I had seen her—the day you left—that in the evening she had risen from her bed and spent two or three hours writing letters. After this that she had told her maid to send for

a public conveyance, as she wanted to go some distance to see a friend, and did not choose to have her own horses out so late. She further added that none of the household need be alarmed if she did not return that night, as in the event of her friend being able to receive her, she might remain away even a day or two, feeling so dull and lonely by herself. Clarice acknowledged to me that she thought all this very odd, but of course felt it was not her place to remonstrate, or even to express an opinion. She would have sent round to me the next day but that she expected her mistress every minute, and did not know whether the latter would desire that I should be informed of her absence.

“ Well, this was literally all the girl could tell me, and you may be sure I lost no time in beginning to act upon even this scanty intelligence. I spent the whole of yesterday, Edgar, in going to every female friend and acquaintance of your wife's that I could hear of, and asking casually if

they had seen her lately. I grieve to say the answers were as unsatisfactory as my search was vain, so the whole thing remains a mystery, and while it is one that I hope and believe may yet be cleared up without detriment of any serious kind to Elsie, I must add that it is one which has occasioned me an amount of mental and bodily fatigue that, at my age, I am ill able bear."

If Mr. Carlyon thus feelingly alluded to his own share of annoyance in this suspicious affair, with a view of deprecating any possible fault-finding on Edgar's part as regarded the luckless issue of the trust reposed in him, he might have spared himself the pains. Edgar's mind was not so small that it could derive consolation in a great misfortune from casting blame on any who might directly or indirectly have contributed to bring it upon him. In all probability he did not as yet even take in the fact that Mr. Carlyon had been an especial sufferer by Elsie's unexplained absence. His personal interest in the matter was of too

grave and important a nature to enable him to look beyond this, in his first startled and excited considering of the case.

He remained perfectly silent for a minute or two after his father's last words, and only a keen observer could have detected the extent of the alarm and agitation which were in reality distracting his mind, and shutting out from his view all that did not immediately bear upon the question of Elsie's absence.

"Are you quite sure there was no letter left for me by my wife?" he said, raising his head abruptly after that interval of silence, "or that none has come since?"

"Had such been the case, I should undoubtedly have been informed of it," was the reply (and this time the old gentleman could not help infusing a little sense of personal injury into his voice). "I did not certainly make the direct enquiry of your wife's maid, because it was so obvious that had a letter been left, it would have been the first thing mentioned. We gain nothing,

however, by discussing this matter fasting, and with no helps to guide us to the light. If you will step into the next room, Edgar, and order up some coffee and cutlets, I will join you in ten minutes, and after that I should suggest our walking round and having an interview with the head of the police."

Had Mr. Carlyon said he should suggest their blowing each other's brains out, Edgar could scarcely have looked more aghast and indignant than he did at this cool proposition.

"That would be my very last resource, sir," he answered in a haughty tone, which only fell short of being an angry one because he remembered in time that the old gentleman was not a husband, and that fatigue and hunger were probably, for the moment, blunting his finer feelings, and making him eager to get the matter settled at any cost. "And as I have no appetite for breakfast, I will go home at once, and question Clarice myself. You will see or hear from me in the course of the day."

Before the father had an opportunity of uttering a single word of remonstrance against what appeared to him a ridiculous and useless proceeding, Edgar had left the room, and was hastening with nearly breathless speed (for these calm men can be excited and fiery enough at times) towards his own desolate home.

In another quarter of an hour he was locked in his private study, with his wife's letter (the letter she had desired Clarice neither to give nor to speak of to any but her husband) clenched as tightly as might be in the hands that had never lost their manly firmness till now.

In the forenoon of that same day, Mr. Carlyon, senior, on emerging from the bath and toilette, which were intended to repair the deficiencies both in his strength and good looks that fatigue and want of sleep had entailed upon him, received from the hands of his valet the following brief communication in his son's writing :—

“ MY DEAR FATHER,

“ I find from a letter my wife left for

me with her maid, that a whim has seized her to go over to England on a visit to her brother. As I cannot, in her state of health, approve of this, I start in an hour's time to bring her back. Be good enough to send on all letters addressed to me at Dr. Paget's.

“(In haste)

“Your affectionate son,

“EDGAR CARLYON.”

CHAPTER IX.

ANOTHER PAGET MARRIED.

WHEN one gentleman enters, before he can even be announced, the presence of another, and, without waiting for the ordinary greetings of common courtesy, demands in a stern voice, "Where is my wife?" I think the individual thus addressed, supposing him to be ignorant of the lady's whereabouts, has some excuse for losing his temper.

Yet Dr. Felix Paget preserved, not only his temper, but his external equanimity, admirably, under a provocation of this kind, which was rendered unusually galling and startling to him

by the fact that it was his brother-in-law, Edgar Carlyon, who thus abruptly walked into his surgery and addressed him, only two days after he had brought his sister Joanna to London.

Having put that brief question to Elsie's brother, Elsie's husband (who had travelled day and night to find the runaway, and was really very much fatigued and depressed) leant his back against the wall facing the doctor's desk, and waited with firmly shut lips for a reply.

Nor had he long to wait, for Felix, with the quickness which belonged to his profession, apprehended in a moment that Mr. Carlyon—however blunt in his manner of announcing the truth—had really lost his wife, and was come to look for her here.

"I do not know," he said, almost outdoing the other in brevity and simplicity of expression; "and now, Mr. Carlyon, as I see you believe me, perhaps you will take a chair and give me some further information in reference to your strange enquiry."

Edgar had turned so white as his brother-in-law spoke out that clear denial of the knowledge imputed to him, that taking a chair seemed an absolute necessity.

He chose one close at hand, and still fronting Dr. Paget, said in a voice that had lost its sternness, but could not hide its agitation—

“I left Elsie at home, and, according to her own special wish, alone, when I went to take Miss Paget to Dover. On my return I find a letter for me in the care of her maid, a letter evidently written under great excitement, telling me she had decided suddenly on coming over to England to her brother. Wholly disapproving of such an independent and rash proceeding, on the part of so very young a woman, I lose not an hour in following her. This is all I have to tell. It appears my journey has been a fruitless one.”

Dr. Paget had listened most attentively to this explanation, and his countenance betrayed the keen interest he was taking, as Elsie's brother, in the matter ; nevertheless some few minutes elapsed

after Mr. Carlyon had finished before he made any comment whatever upon what he had heard. Then it was a question which broke the silence that had grown most oppressive to the last speaker.

“Did any reason exist for my sister’s acting in a manner so opposed to her usual habits of timidity and dependence, or do you believe her to have been influenced by mere caprice?”

Mr. Carlyon seemed greatly disposed to put on his ice armour and stand at once on the defensive, as he found the questioning was not to be all on his side, but real and growing anxiety concerning his lost wife conquered the evil spirit for once, and he answered with tolerable courtesy—

“Had any actual reason existed, I should scarcely be here now, but doubtless Elsie’s imagination created a fair excuse for her conduct. I told you her letter was written under great mental excitement; it was, indeed, scarcely the composition of a sane person. She has listened, with the fatuity of the most ignorant and in-

experienced child, to idle or malicious tongues, whose poison has maddened her weak brain. But all this just at present is apart from the main question," he added, seeming abruptly aware of being beguiled beyond the point he had fixed as the limit of his confidence, "that question being where we are to look for Elsie now. Can you suggest anything to help me?"

Dr. Paget, it will be remembered, cordially disliked and at one time wholly mistrusted his sister Elsie's husband. The reports of his other sisters, of Joanna especially, and of James Oliver, had done something lately towards modifying these very strong sentiments; but had they existed in their fullest force when Edgar Carlyon entered his surgery that day, they must all of them have given place to deep compassion and sympathy, as soon as he perceived how real and genuine was the torture of mind his proud brother-in-law was enduring and striving to conceal.

"I wish from my heart I *could* help you in any way," Felix said, in answer to Edgar's last

question; "but being so completely in the dark as to motives and influences, I really have not a suggestion to make that might not sound like the veriest absurdity, except, indeed, just this, that my sister may have started for England as she proposed doing, and fallen sick on the journey. Joanna tells me she had been for some time in a weak and ailing state of health."

"Quite true," responded the husband, while a deeper cloud that Felix had no means of penetrating shadowed his already brooding countenance; "and what you suggest is extremely likely. Elsie would not have told a wilful falsehood in that letter she left for me—she must have meant to come to you at once, and I know her purse was well supplied. Poor simple girl! Perhaps she is laid up at some hotel on the road, and too ill to communicate with any of us. I shall return at once, and make enquiries every step of the way. Another time, Dr. Paget, I hope to thank you more graciously for your sympathy and delicacy. Now I will only say good-bye,

and entreat you, should you hear anything bearing ever so remotely upon this matter, to lose not a second in giving me notice of it. I have it greatly at heart that my wife should be under my protection again before this foolish escapade of hers becomes the subject of public gossip."

Felix Paget was not a man to forget the duties of hospitality, even under such circumstances as these, but he understood too well the nature of a heart-wound like that his unexpected guest had received, to become importunate or persevering when his offers of bed and board, even for a single night, were firmly declined. One favour Mr. Carlyon asked before leaving the surgery, and this was that to no other member of the family should Elsie's strange flight be at present mentioned; and Felix was perfectly willing to keep the secret, not only on Elsie's account, but because he foresaw that the disclosure of it would terribly upset and agitate them all, and might be the means of retarding Joanna's marriage, which Mr. Paget's failing health, no less than Mr.

Oliver's impatience, made him very desirous of hurrying on.

It was not till Mr. Carlyon had gone and left him alone in the surgery that Elsie's brother was able to reflect calmly on the mysterious circumstance which had been so suddenly brought before his notice, and in which his little sister's honour and happiness, even her personal safety, might, for aught he knew, be involved. In the presence of her husband, whose ill-concealed alarm and agitation had aroused his sincerest pity, Felix had treated the matter as lightly as so really grave a matter could be treated, but in his inmost heart he was by no means inclined to underrate the importance of the rash step Elsie had taken, nor to excuse the childish folly, as he deemed it, which had prompted her to leave her home. Her husband had hinted that she had been actuated by jealousy—so, at least, Dr. Paget had understood—but, even with the remembrance of all the old suspicions of Edgar Carlyon fresh in his mind, Felix could not, after his brother-in-law's

demeanour of to-day, seriously believe that Elsie had real cause for jealousy. In any case she should have waited for certain confirmation of her doubts—have spoken of them to her husband face to face, before she did a thing so open to mis-construction, and which, by so many men, would never have been forgiven.

It has been said already that Dr. Paget held unusually strict notions with regard to the conduct of women. Had a wife of his own left his protection without a just and unanswerable cause, simply on account of idle reports to which she should have been ashamed even to listen, he felt that it would have cost him a great deal to have pardoned and received her again. Edgar Carlyon was as proud a man as himself, and Felix, with all his prejudice and what once amounted to animosity against his brother-in-law, could not but acknowledge that there must be something noble and self-forgetting in his character to enable him in all this disastrous matter to think so much more of possible harm or suffering to his

wife, than of the injury and insult she had offered to himself.

It was because Dr. Paget so sternly disapproved of his sister's conduct, because, after all his vexed musings on the subject during the whole of that day he could find no sort of excuse for it, that he resisted the temptation to mention the affair to his friend, James Oliver. Better, far better, since her husband was willing to overlook her foolishness, that it should be known to as few as possible. Edgar himself would find it easier by and bye to forget a wrong that had not been exaggerated or distorted by public gossip, and Elsie, when she came to her right mind, would be thankful to know within what narrow limits her temporary insanity could be talked about.

So Felix kept his own counsel for the next five days with a sufficiently restless and anxious mind ; and, on the sixth, there arrived for him the following brief and unsatisfactory letter from Paris—

“ I have just got home again, after a diligent

but wholly unsuccessful search for the missing individual. Nobody at all answering the description I gave has travelled on either of the roads between Paris and London during the last two or three weeks. My uneasiness concerning her safety and well-being has been hourly increasing, and much as I shrink from so desperate a measure, I think I have now no choice but to act upon my father's advice, and employ the police to assist me in my further search. You shall be duly informed of all we do in the matter. Let me still entreat absolute secrecy at home.

“Yours faithfully,

“E. CARLYON.”

This letter, as may be imagined, was not at all calculated to cheer the spirits of Elsie's brother, or help him in his efforts to make the best of what his foolish little sister had done. From this time, indeed, a thought he had hitherto indignantly dismissed on each occasion of its obtruding itself upon him, gained serious ground

in his mind, and robbed him of all peace and quietness whenever its dark form came between him and the sun.

He would have given much to know whether such a thought had ever glanced across the husband's mind, and, if so, how he had greeted it; but days went by, and no other letters from Paris arrived in England, and Felix grew hourly more and more impatient, chafing desperately under the impossibility of crossing the channel and seeing for himself how things were going on.

Joanna was to be married in less than a week now, and her brother could not, without a full disclosure of the whole matter, have absented himself at such an interesting time. Mr. Paget was in too feeble a state to permit of his even being present at the ceremony; and on Felix, therefore, devolved the duty—certainly one of the pleasantest that life had yet conferred on him—of giving his sister to his friend.

It was not, indeed, the sister he had once so fondly hoped to give, but later days had more

than reconciled him to the exchange. They had convinced him that the child Elsie, with all her winning grace and fascination, had only captivated the imagination of James Oliver, while to the thoughtful, earnest minded Joanna was given the love and deep esteem that should last a lifetime, nor perish in the life beyond.

A quiet, uneventful, unromantic wedding, with no breakfast, no speeches, few congratulations after it. Such was the wedding of James Oliver and Joanna Paget; yet seldom could a more thoroughly happy pair have gone away from those church doors, or looked fuller contentment than they did on entering the unpretending carriage that was to take them the first stage of their honeymoon journey.

"We don't want any exciting scenes, much less any pretence of merry-making in our changed position," Mrs. Paget had said, speaking for her husband and herself; "so, if Joanna does not mind, we can all breakfast together quietly first, and, as she will be married in a bonnet and

a plain grey silk, they can go off from the church door. This will save no end of expense and trouble."

To which all parties were quite agreed—Felix, who might, under different circumstances, have thought it right to insist on a breakfast at his own cost, being really glad, with the load about Elsie on his mind, to escape joining in social festivities even on the mildest scale.

"God bless you, my dear, and give you an easy life," were the mother's parting words to her daughter. "I don't know what that is, certainly, from experience, but I can fancy it something very pleasant. Now, when your sister Georgina's marriage, by delivering me from her horrid temper, would have made me a happy woman, I have to live as a dependent on my own son, and to nurse and wait upon your poor father as if he were an infant. It really is *very* hard."

Mr. Paget shed a few tears when his turn came to say farewell to his last unmarried daughter; but broken down as he was in mind, as well as

body, he knew she was going to be a good man's wife, and, personally, Joanna had never been a favorite.

"I am thinking of poor Lillie," he said, apparently in explanation of even the slight emotion he manifested. "You will be much happier than she has ever been, my dear, yet I am sure Lillie was as good a girl as ever breathed. It is a strange world, with most things turned topsy turvy in it; and, for my part, I begin not to care how soon I'm out of it."

But if Joanna was little regretted, and would be little missed in her own family, there was one whose love and devotion would more than make up for all other deficiencies. She knew this, and turned to him and to her new life with unutterable thankfulness, and, with a fervent prayer that she might never, in the fulness of her earthly blessedness, forget that her true home was still where sin, as well as sorrow, shall be no more found.

CHAPTER X.

THE RUNAWAY FOUND.

If hard work were always effectual in driving away anxiety, Dr. Paget would have been tolerably free from so troublesome a guest during his partner's brief absence. But no amount of labour, of going to and fro, of ceaseless dedication of himself to the numerous sufferers who claimed his time, could enable him to forget, even for a moment, the uncertainty that surrounded his little sister's fate, and the probable torture to which this uncertainty was exposing her husband.

It seemed so unaccountable to him that Edgar should not have written again, even had there

been no definite intelligence to convey. Do what he would, Felix could not help arguing, from this silence of his brother-in-law's, that on his mind too had dawned the miserable suspicion which for so many days had been resisting all Dr. Paget's efforts to crush it underfoot. One thing appeared quite clear to him, and that was the impossibility of bearing the present suspense much longer. James Oliver was to be home in a week—he would not take, even for his bride's gratification, another hour's holiday this time—and Felix resolved within himself that the instant they arrived he would make an excuse of wanting rest, and start off for Paris immediately.

But his plans were unexpectedly frustrated, and by an event which he had ceased even to think of, as within the range of probability.

Entering his surgery one evening in a great hurry, only, indeed, to fetch something he wanted for a patient he was on his way to visit, Dr. Paget was startled to find a closely veiled female seated by his writing table in his own chair. As

it was getting towards dusk, and the gas had not yet been lighted, it was some seconds before he had made out even thus much concerning the shadowy, motionless form that appeared to have taken such unceremonious possession of his sanctum. He was debating whether he should address the figure at once, or call the boy from the inner room to light the gas first, when the silks in which the intruder was enveloped began to rustle in the chair, and the next minute their wearer had sprung to his side, and wound her arms pleadingly round him.

"Felix, I have not startled you much, have I? I know I am dreadfully changed, but you won't love or pity me less on this account; you will receive me and give me a home for a little while, won't you?"

"Elsie," said her brother, commanding himself by a strong effort, as he discovered from the speaker's voice that weakness and excitement were both nearly overpowering her, "you have, of course, startled me somewhat by this unex-

pected visit; but let me put you back in the chair, my child, and remove your veil from your face—so—there; now I can see you better, and you *are* looking thinner and pale certainly. Poor little girl, you are tired from your journey no doubt; but I must forbid any explanations just yet, my dear, as you really are not strong enough for them, nor for conversation of any kind. Sit still, Elsie, while I introduce some light into this dark room, and fetch you a glass of wine. Come, you used to be very obedient to me in the old days; you would not be rebellious now, would you?"

For Elsie, though she had suffered herself to be placed in the easy chair, showed no signs at all of intending to remain quiet in it. Her features worked convulsively, as if she wanted to talk but was hindered either by bodily weakness or emotion; her hands (so wasted and pale they were, that Felix shuddered to look at them) kept clasping and unclasping upon her lap, and every now and then she would half rise and make a movement towards her brother, who was busy

with the gas, but immediately sink back again, in touching acknowledgment of her physical prostration.

But in a minute or two Dr. Paget brought her bread and wine, and fed her slowly and gently as he would have fed a sick child, till there came a little tinge of colour into the white face, and all that terrible outward agitation in some degree subsided.

"I am very tired, Felix," were the first words she spoke after the feeding process was concluded—"and I shall be so thankful to rest somewhere. You will find me a corner in your home, won't you, dear, for the little time I shall need it. I will not be troublesome or expensive to anybody."

"All right, Elsie," replied Felix, trying to speak in a cheerful, encouraging voice, though he had seldom had his self possession so severely tested; "I will make you as comfortable as I can, little girl, until Joanna returns to nurse and take care of you. She will be in London the day

after to-morrow, and there is a pretty cottage at Notting Hill, all ready for her and her husband. I think, Elsie, I will drive you there at once, and give you in charge, for to-night at least, to the housekeeper, who is an elderly woman and thoroughly kind and respectable. You see, my dear," he added, in a half hesitating manner, as uncertain how she would receive it, "the old people are not expecting you in England, and my father is in a precarious state of health, and my mother growing very excitable—"

"Oh, I know, I know," interrupted Elsie with a quickness for which her brother was not prepared; "and indeed I don't want to increase their troubles or anxieties, Felix. You may take me where you like, do what you please with me. I could not help coming to you because there was nobody else who could have given me shelter; but I am indifferent to everything in the world—to life or death, or that which follows death. What, indeed, can there be of interest here or hereafter for a woman who has voluntarily left

the husband she loves better than her own soul? —Oh, Felix, never think," she continued in returning excitement, "nor let anybody think that because I left Edgar I had ceased to love him. I shall love him even when the grass is waving over my grave, though dying I shall know that it is this love which has killed me."

"But we won't talk either of loving or dying any more to-night, Elsie, dear," said Felix, soothingly—"I am going to send for a cab at once and take you to Joanna's home ; and then when I have paid a professional visit or two, I will return and have another look at you, little sister. Only think how astonished Jo and Oliver will be to find such a birdie in their pretty nest on their arrival."

So he talked to her ; so he tried to divert her thoughts, and hinder them from dwelling too exclusively, at least for this one night, upon the sorrows that he plainly saw were destroying both mind and body. But Elsie, overtaken at last by a grief that would not be parried or thrust aside, by a storm that left the darkened heavens

without a chink for the sunlight to pierce through—Elsie, with the “infinite burden of life” weighing upon her, was a very helpless, abject, pitiable creature indeed. She had no more power to turn her thoughts from herself and her wrongs, even for a single minute, than she had of recovering by a mere effort of the will the bodily strength of which the incessant contemplation of these wrongs had deprived her.

“I would rather not have seen Joanna,” she said in answer to her brother’s last observation—“and I will not see Mr. Oliver. Jo can put me in some room out of the way, I suppose, where I can die in peace, and without troubling anybody. Don’t tell me I shall not die, Felix, please, because I like to think it—it is my only comfort.”

“I will tell you nothing to-night, Elsie,” he replied indulgently, “except that you had better have some supper when we get to Notting Hill, and, after that, a composing draught that I will send you. Do you sleep pretty well generally?”

“Oh, no,” she said, suddenly covering her face

with her hands and shuddering. "I cannot sleep for the phantom which comes and stands between my curtains at night, or hovers in the air above my head, or sometimes lies on the pillow beside me. It was the constant presence of this thing, Felix, which brought on the illness that prevented my getting to you sooner. I went to Madame Le Clerc's—she was my singing mistress and a friend of Lillie's—but I only meant to stay one night; she was very, very good to me and nursed me like a sister, and let nobody know that I was with her—but she could not keep me—I mean I would not stay with her—when I felt able to come here to you. I was afraid enquiries might be made for me in Paris if Mr. Carlyon discovered I was not in England. I did not want him to be uneasy, Felix, or to think any harm had happened to me. Mind, I have not accused my husband. I never will accuse or blame him. I left him of my own free will; but I should be horribly afraid now to see him again. You must promise me, Felix dear, to write im-

mediately and say I am safe with you, and that you will keep me. Will you do this to-night?"

"Here we are," said Dr. Paget, with a sensation of relief as their cab stopped before the gates of a small, cheerful looking house standing in a neat garden—"and now, Elsie, you must forget that I am anything but a stern physician who exacts a most rigorous attention to all his orders. To-morrow I will come and talk with you on any subject you please, but to-night not another word is to be spoken, except as between doctor and patient. Let me see how good and submissive my little sister can be."

Elsie sighed wearily as Felix lifted her out of the cab and gave her in charge to Mr. Oliver's motherly looking house-keeper—but her strength was too far gone to permit of her making any active opposition to a superior will—and after arranging that she should have some tea and be put to bed, and that Mrs. Jones should sleep in the same room with her, Dr. Paget bade her an affectionate good night, and went away to visit his

patients, and to write, when that duty was over, the following letter to Elsie's husband.

“DEAR MR. CARLYON,

“Your wife is safe and under my protection. She made her appearance in the surgery late this evening; but her health of *mind*, as well as of body, is evidently so shattered that as yet I have gained little information from her, having felt it absolutely necessary to forbid talking until she has recovered a little strength. From some disjointed confessions, however, I gather that she has been, since leaving her home, with a Frenchwoman whom she called her singing mistress. Here she seems to have fallen too ill to get on to England, which doubtless it was her intention to do from the first. Some overwhelming trouble (whether real or imaginary *I* am not in a position to say), is manifestly disturbing not only her peace but her reason. She raves of a phantom that constantly appears to her and deprives her of rest at nights. I fear were you to attempt to see her at

present, unless you could give *the fullest and most satisfactory explanation* concerning the matter which has turned your wife's brain—or nearly so—more harm than good would be done. She does not accuse you of anything, and seems anxious, 'poor child! to save you from uneasiness on her account; but it does not require extraordinary penetration to read so simple and guileless a heart as Elsie's, and I feel persuaded that jealousy, which has evidently fixed upon some *definite*, if not probable, object, is at the root of all. I need not add that I will take every care of her, as will also Joanna, in whose new home I have left her for the moment till I hear your wishes on the subject; but I dare not conceal that I consider my poor sister in a most critical and alarming state. I have presumed, in my character of doctor only, to offer advice, but I cannot, especially while I remain so completely in the dark as to your private affairs, venture to dictate. Your wife is here; you must use your own judgment as

to the rest. In the meanwhile I will write daily of her progress.

“Yours faithfully,

“FELIX PAGET.”

It will be seen from this letter that Elsie's brother, having at once, on looking into her face that night, abandoned the most terrible of the suspicions that had been haunting him for so many days, and being both disappointed and mystified at Mr. Carlyon's long silence, had lost that absolute confidence in his brother-in-law's truth and honour which his recent interview with him had, for the time, inspired. At any rate he now stood in doubt of him, and I suppose most brothers would have done the same who had seen a little sister they fondly loved reduced to the verge of insanity, and been appealed to by her to keep her from the husband whom still she declared to be the dearest object of her own affections.

CHAPTER XI.

MR. RICHARD DOES A LITTLE BUSINESS.

MR. RICHARD WILMOT was not a man to abandon lightly any purpose on which he had set his heart. If baffled in one direction he was quite ready to turn to another; and if by his unaided exertions there was, after all, a difficulty in arriving at his ends, he had no scruples or pride concerning the employment of any sort of agents who could lend him a helping hand.

A day or two after his unsatisfactory meeting with Mr. Edgar Carlyon near the white villa, he had called upon an acquaintance of his own, whose dwelling was by no means in the most

aristocratic quarter of Paris, and whose general appearance indeed would scarcely favour the idea that he had anything to do with the respectable part of society. They had met—these two men—at a low gambling house some weeks before, and Dick had fraternised with him chiefly because he could drink deeper than most of the foreigners he knew, and also because he could speak a little English; and pretended (he was an Italian himself) to have a great respect for that nation.

So Mr. Richard had kept his eye upon this new friend of his ever since; and though they had not seen much of each other, it was quite understood that if the Italian wanted any help that Mr. Richard could give, he had only to ask it; and *vice versa*.

The *vice versa* happened to come first, and necessitated a rather long interview between these sworn allies in a very small and very filthy room on the sixth story of an exceedingly questionable mansion, in a locality not much frequented by decent people of any class.

The Italian, who called himself Stefano—probably he had half-a-dozen other names—had written a letter in the Gallic language for Mr. Richard Wilmot, and was now sipping some very tolerable claret the latter had had the forethought to bring with him, smoking at intervals an equally passable cigar, the gift of the same generous friend, and enquiring indolently what he could do next.

“Why, you see,” said Dick, draining his own glass, which had held quite as much brandy as claret; “I don’t somehow make much progress towards getting on visiting terms with that Madame Felice I told you of at Versailles. The old dragon who guards her won’t take my money nor listen to my honeyed speeches, though being a woman she *must* be vain, and I’ve sworn to her that she’s fair as Venus and chaste as Diana. I wonder, now, if you, being a foreigner, could manage her better.”

“Possibly,” responded Stefano, puffing out a volume of smoke almost into his friend’s face and

looking ever so slightly contemptuous. "Anyhow, I should set about it in some other fashion than telling a toothless hag of eighty or ninety that she resembled a young and blooming goddess. Women *are* vain, but most of them have wit to understand when the season for vanity is over; and there is sure to be another passion or weakness ready to take the place of this one."

"Well, how would you manage to get at her blind side?" interrupted Mr. Richard rather rudely. "It don't matter to me, you know, *how* it's done, so that it *is* done, and as quickly as possible. How can I tell how long that fine Madame may remain within my reach!"

"And if you succeed in getting into her presence," asked the other, still very lazily and indifferently, "what then? Are you enamoured of her beauty, and determined to run away with her?"

"Oh dear no, by no means," laughed Mr. Richard, seeming to think this a very excellent joke. "I only want to give her a little informa-

tion that may be useful to her, about family matters, and to persuade her to leave the neighbourhood without consulting her friends. If I could get up a case of 'mysterious disappearance,' and surround it with a few suspicious circumstances that the journals would be sure to make the most of, it would be easy to direct public attention to the only individual known to visit at the house, and who, being a married man, might, under certain circumstances, have an interest in ridding himself of so fair a witness of his conjugal infidelity. Oh, but it would be a glorious way of setting my foot upon the proud neck of the insolent fellow who has dared to scorn me, and who would hang me willingly if he could, and come and smile serenely at the little show. But yes, as you foreign chaps say, there never was a finer idea, nor one better worth the pains of carrying out. Now tell me how I am to bamboozle the old crone."

"Supposing that I undertake that part of the

business," replied Signor Stefano, looking for the first time intently at his companion, "and succeed in procuring you a free admission to the villa, what is to be my reward?"

"Hang it!" cried Mr. Richard, "you do come down upon a fellow sharp and hard. Ain't I willing to help you whenever it is in my power? and don't you know that money's about as scarce with me, since that last run of ill luck, as rain in Egypt? What do you want?"

"A good deal, I am afraid, that your friendship, valuable as it is, can't procure for me," returned Stefano, with a sort of sneering jocoseness that Mr. Dick scarcely relished. "But as a recompense for 'doing' the old woman, and prevailing on her to admit you—disguised as a smuggler or a pedlar, we'll say—into your fair princess's bower, I shall want about four or five hundred francs. The work's cheap, too, at that money."

Mr. Wilmot looked at his friend, whistled a

few bars of one of the popular airs of his own country, and finally said, with a spice of national humour that no doubt the foreigner appreciated—

“Don't you wish you may get it, old boy?”

“Come, we are really wasting time,” replied the Italian, whose demeanour was, however, far from conveying the notion that such a sin would lay heavy on his conscience, “and if you're not disposed to bargain to-day, I'll be off to some other amusement. What if you have not the money in your pocket at the present moment—it's not so difficult to obtain, when two clever fellows work in concert. Look here; what should hinder us from paying a midnight visit to that same guarded castle you are bent upon entering by day, and helping ourselves to any little valuables that may be about. It will be easy for you to take stock of all the internal arrangements of the house, while you are prevailing on the lady to absent herself from it. When she is gone (for I suppose you will have wit enough to manage that part of the affair) we need not mind

disturbing the rosy dreams of your elderly Venus, who will doubtless be left in charge. Come, don't sham indignation and horror at this pretty little scheme of mine, but confess, like a man, that if you've never been mixed up in anything of the kind before, it's only been for want of the opportunity."

"I certainly never *have* been a housebreaker!" said Mr. Richard, who, to do him justice, had nearly lost his breath in listening to this cool proposal—"and what's more, I don't mean to begin the trade now. If you are serious in what you have suggested, I must beg to wish you a very good evening. Here's my last cigar. You're welcome to it for old acquaintance sake. I'll go home now and drink to your reformation."

"All right!" responded Stefano, pocketing the cigar and catching up his greasy straw hat, "I'm going towards the terminus of your railway and will walk part of the way with you. Bless you; I'm not a boy to take offence at a trifle. The saints forbid! Besides, I am such an admirer

of your fine, high principled, scrupulous nation."

It was a tolerably long walk from Stefano's lodgings to the Versailles terminus, and the two men did it very leisurely, smoking and talking in friendly fashion as they went. Once they stopped to enter a dark, curious looking shop, where, amongst other heterogeneous articles, a variety of religious relics, all warranted genuine, were to be disposed of.

"If I'm not mistaken," laughed the Italian, as he selected and paid for an apostle's tooth in excellent preservation, "this will do the old lady's business quicker than all your mythological compliments. I shall be at Versailles to-morrow, and I think the next day you may get your pedlar's box and arrive with it (by accident) at the gates of the white Villa. Mind you find out whether they keep a watch dog about the premises, because if so I know of something that will be good for its health this hot weather. And now, my friend, our roads separate, so *addio. Au revoir.*"

* * * *

The occupant of the white Villa—a pale, listless, melancholy looking woman she was—received with some appearance of annoyance, not amounting to displeasure, for which indeed she was altogether too indifferent, her old servant's announcement that an English pedlar wished to exhibit to her his goods, and was waiting in the hall for the lady's permission to enter.

"You know I want nothing, Marie," said the mistress languidly, "and it was foolish of you to let him in. I detest English people," she added in a peevish tone, and sighing as she spoke, "but if the man is here, he must come in. I can buy some threads and tapes for you, Marie."

The vendor of threads and tapes was accordingly admitted, and Marie who usually remained in the room whenever any such persons were allowed to exhibit their wares to Madame Felice, discovered now that something was cooking on the fire that must be attended to, and left the man to recommend his bargains alone.

"I am really sorry you should have the trouble of undoing your pack," said the lady, as Mr.

Richard Wilmot deposited a very professional looking case on the floor. "I am not in want of anything in your way just now, but if you have English cottons and tapes I will take some of you since my servant has brought you in. You are from England of course?"

"Why, yes," replied Mr. Richard, not much astonished to find himself in the presence of a countrywoman, for he remembered Mr. Cheviot's story of Maud Carlyon, and had often thought that young lady and Madame Felice might be one. "I have the honor to be of the same nation as yourself, and the further honor to be connected by marriage with the family of Madame Felice. In point of fact," he continued, abruptly dropping the ceremonious tone which accorded little with his habits, "I am not a pedlar at all, but Richard Wilmot, Esqre., at your service, the husband of Lillie Paget, and the brother-in-law of Mr. Edgar Carlyon who married my wife's youngest sister. I hope I have made myself perfectly understood."

Madame Felice had changed colour half a dozen times and otherwise manifested considerable agitation while this lucid explanation of her visitor's position in society was being made to her. She was very pale, and her lips trembled obviously as, on Mr. Wilmot's coming to a full stop, she asked in a low voice—

“And what, if you are telling me the truth, is your object in coming to me?”

“A friendly one to yourself,” Mr. Dick unblushingly asserted, “as well as to my little sister-in-law who has found out that her husband visits somebody here in secret. The poor child—she is but a child in years—is breaking her foolish heart, but Mr. Edgar keeps her at too great a distance for there to be any fear of her speaking to him about it. I presumed, of course, that you did not know of this gentleman's being married—your cousin I believe he is—and that on my giving you this information you would be glad to get out of his way, if only to punish him for keeping you in the dark. Take my word for

it, he's a deep one and a bad one, and will bring trouble upon all who have to do with him. I speak, mind you, from accurate knowledge, and can have no motive——”

“Leave your motives till I challenge them,” interrupted the lady haughtily, “and tell me what I should gain, or what Mr. Carlyon's wife would gain by my going away now, if, as you assert, she has been made acquainted with the fact of her husband visiting me, and is unhappy about it?”

Mr. Richard was not quite prepared for this question, nor for the cool way in which it seemed to him the lady received his implied accusations, but after a minute's pause he said—

“Your leaving the neighbourhood would put a stop to Mr. Edgar's coming over here; and finding he came no more, the little girl's suspicions would die out. She's the simplest creature in the world, and the doubts and fears that are destroying her now could soon be expelled from her mind if not kept alive by proofs

of an unanswerable nature. She's a delicate thing that you'd think a breath might blow away, and I hear from my own wife that her health is rapidly failing."

Madame Felice bit her white lips till they grew red again, and something glittered in her large, sad eyes, as Mr. Wilmot gave, with apparent truthfulness, this unpleasant information.

"I knew she was not well," she said, speaking more to herself than to the man beside her, "but how could I possibly suppose that I was in any way the cause? Mr. Wilmot—" looking up at him suddenly—"set your mind at rest on this subject. Edgar Carlyon, who is, as you conjecture, my cousin, and nothing more, shall give his young wife no further anxiety on my account. He shall not come near me again. Family circumstances of a painful nature forbid my seeing my cousin's wife, and explaining to her my true position, but if the cessation of Edgar's rare visits to me will restore her peace of mind the

thing is easily done. I will write to him and settle it all at once. I thank you for whatever has been kindly meant, either to her or to me, in your present revelations; and now, as I am not strong, and wholly unused to receive strangers, I must beg you to excuse me. My servant will assist you with your load. Good morning."

"One moment, my dear lady," interposed Mr. Richard, who began to understand better than he had done at first the extent of this fair recluse's knowledge of the world and its crooked ways; and, as he spoke, he laid his coarse hand lightly on her arm. "One moment, while I assure you that the plan you propose, simple and easy as it appears, must not, for various important reasons, be carried out. You could not forbid your cousin's visits without assigning a reason for it—the merest hint of the truth would cause Mr. Edgar to sift the whole thing to the bottom—oh, don't I know him well? Then he would discover through what channel his wife has been made acquainted with his visits to you—his anger would be kindled,

and there would be bloodshed to a dead certainty. My dear lady, I shudder even to think of the mischief that must ensue from the imprudence you have been contemplating. Mr. Carlyon is of a hot, fiery temper, though you may not be aware of it. He would naturally hear in the course of his enquiries what the world says of his secret visits to so fair a lady"—here Mr. Richard made a bow to Madame Felice that very much resembled one of the antics of a dancing bear—"and he would fiercely resent its slanderous opinion of his conduct—he would seek some victim on whom to wreak his indignant feelings, and I am sure you would be the first to mourn his either slaying another man, or being slain himself in defending your name and fame against a censorious public."

It would almost seem from this high-flown speech of rough Richard Wilmot that he had been dipping lately into one of his wife's romances ; but the individual he addressed had lived too long out of the world, and too entirely in the narrow sphere of her own personal sorrows,

to have any great discernment as to character, or any quick apprehension as regarded things new and unfamiliar to her.

She looked wearied and annoyed at being detained, and at having to continue discussing a subject of so delicate a nature with a stranger; but odd as that stranger's interference in the matter appeared, the very bluntness and openness of Mr. Wilmot's manner helped to assure her of his good faith; and, sitting down once more, she said, with a perplexed and troubled face—

“Then what am I to do to repair the mischief I have caused? You tell me to leave this place; but whither would you have me go? I have not a friend in the world, except Mr. Carlyon and his son. Can I speak to the old man, and ask him to advise me?”

“Certainly not,” Mr. Richard hastened to reply; “he is indiscretion itself, and would reveal everything to his son in five minutes. But I have a proposition to make to you which I hope may

• meet your approval. I am about running down on a little matter of business to a place near Marseilles, where, in all probability, I shall take a small house and send for my wife to join me. When we are settled you can come and stop with us. Lillie—that's my wife's absurdly fanciful name—will be proud and delighted to receive you. She's lonely and moping herself, poor girl! as my avocations call me a good deal from home, and you would be doing her a real kindness in paying her a long visit. Bless you," he continued, warming with the anticipation of showing hospitality to so elegant a lady, and a Carlyon, "we would take the greatest care in the world of you, and make you fat and rosy in no time. You could easily let Mr. Edgar know on the sly that you were safe and with friends. I would undertake to convey a letter to him unsuspected by Mistress Elsie, who of course watches narrowly all that come through the post. I say, now, isn't this a bright thought of mine? But trust Dick Wilmot, stupid as he looks, for help-

ing a lame dog over a stile, or for managing any neat little job that requires delicate handling."

If Mr. Richard did not look stupid he looked very red and coarse and vulgar, the redness and the coarseness and the vulgarity becoming more and more noticeable as his eagerness increased, and the very small amount of shyness he might have felt at first, wore off. Madame Felice contemplated her guest in deepening wonder, and a kind of languid interest was created in her mind on the subject of the lady with the fanciful name who called this man husband.

"How can you answer for Mrs. Wilmot being glad to receive me?" she said, when she had thought over Mr. Richard's proposal a minute or two. "If, as you assert, my fair name has been so roughly dealt with, is it not likely that a young and virtuous English matron would shrink from my society?"

"Oh, she'd better not shrink from any society I choose to bring her," replied Mr. Dick, thrown off his guard for the moment. "It would be a

bad day for that young woman, I can tell you, when she disputed my will, or attempted to thwart my wishes. Besides, my dear lady," he added in another and a milder tone, "*I* know how false and cruel all the slanders about you have been, and Lillie shall know it too. Only be persuaded to come, and you will have no cause to complain of your treatment."

"And how long can you give me to think over your kind suggestion?" was the next enquiry of Madame Felice. "I really could not decide on so important a matter in a hurry."

"There is no need," he said quickly, and with triumph at even this partial success, making his face redder and uglier than ever. "You can write to me at the Marseilles post-office, and if you write, as I hope and wish, I will then let you know how soon I can get my wife down, and be ready to receive you. There is going to be another marriage in the family, and I suppose Lillie will want to stop for this; but they are hurrying matters on, as I hear, and in a few weeks I think

we may reckon on getting you off, and so making things straight again between that child Elsie and her husband. To tell you the truth," and here he winked at the refined Madame Felice, "that little girl's a monstrous favourite of mine, and I'd go through fire and water to do her a service."

With which veracious assertion, Mr. Richard Wilmot, declining the assistance of the female who had been won by an Apostle's tooth, after turning a deaf ear to all his flattering speeches, took up his pedlar's box, shook with true British warmth the delicate hand that had not, however, been offered to him, and finally departed.

"There is a fate, then, more terrible than mine," soliloquized the lonely occupant of the white Villa, as she rested her aching head against the cool marble of the mantel-piece as soon as the door had closed upon her guest; "and even I, with my broken heart and grave sick spirit, may be some slight comfort to the poor Lillie who has bound herself for life to that coarse

and vulgar tyrant. What do his motives signify to me. I am weary to death of this place, wearier still of myself and my own sorrows. I will make my conditions, which he cannot object to comply with. I will let Edgar know I am safe, tell him I have been seized with one of my old caprices; and then I will go and share this Lillie Paget's miserable home. Lillie Paget! Ah, when that name was familiar to me the sun shone in a summer sky, and the world was a world of flowers and gladness. Now the flowers and the sunshine and the summer sky are all gone, and in their place have come darkness and barrenness, and an aching, yearning heart for ever and ever!"

CHAPTER XIV.

LILLIE'S NEW COMPANION.

POOR Lillie's sad anticipations in reference to the dreariness and want of companionship she should feel in her new home in the south, were more than realized. She missed her sisters cruelly; she missed the occasional visits and the never failing kindness of her friend Mr. Cheviot; she missed even the still rarer visits, but the no less certain sympathy, of Madame Le Clerc; she missed and regretted all that had grown familiar and pleasant to her in the neighbourhood of Paris, and she could by no means reconcile herself to the large, comfortless, ill-furnished

rooms (most of them having only brick floors), of the cheap, badly situated house Mr. Wilmot had hired and called their home, in that village near Marseilles, which has been before spoken of.

"I shan't be likely to trouble you much with *my* society," Mr. Richard had said to his wife on the night of her arrival; "but I suppose you won't fret your heart out on that account—more shame for you! However, by and bye, it may chance that I shall bring you somebody else to keep you company and put a little spirit into you. That confounded trash you're always reading has made you as dull as ditch water, and I hate dull women like poison."

Mrs. Richard Wilmot could have said that she was surrounded by many other influences more potent in taking the spirit out of her than her poor, much abused literature; but Lillie was meeker now than she had been in the old days, so she only replied to her husband's coarse speech by a very natural question.

"Whom do you propose bringing me as a companion, Richard?"

"Never you mind that, young woman," he answered crossly enough, for fortune had not been smiling upon this deserving gentleman lately. "When the thing is settled you'll hear all about it—not a minute before, you may take your oath. I know what the wise man said about telling secrets to women, and I'm quite of his opinion. Now don't you open your mouth again on this subject till I open mine, for it doesn't suit my humour to be cross-questioned."

It was nearly a fortnight before Mr. Richard opened his mouth again (to quote his own choice language) on the subject of his wife's companion. Then he entered her room abruptly one day, threw a note for a hundred francs in her lap, and desired her to go out at once and buy some new furniture and nick-knacks for their spare bedroom, as the lady he had told her of, the night of her arrival, would be with them the following evening.

"You never mentioned any lady to me," said Lillie, looking up with surprised eyes, and an additional shade of red in her cheeks; "you spoke vaguely, if you remember, of *somebody* to keep me company—that was all."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Mr. Dick, who was generally in a good temper when he had received money—"and so you concluded modestly and virtuously that I was going to give you a male companion, did you? Upon my honour, young woman, you have not read French romances for nothing. This is a capital joke really, and I am quite sorry to be obliged to disappoint you. A male companion, by Jingo! and you calling yourself, and being looked upon by others, as a pure and strait-laced English matron. Ha, ha, ha!"

If the wife's face, as she raised it for a moment to her husband's, and then as quickly turned it away, expressed contempt that almost amounted to loathing, she must not be too severely judged. A man who will lightly accuse a virtuous wife of

immodesty, and then declare it an amusing joke, surely deserves contempt and loathing.

Very quietly, however, Lillie said, when his loud laugh had ceased—

“I never thought of a male companion, Richard. I had an idea that it might be a child you were proposing to bring me to educate. I should have liked that so very much.”

“Oh, should you indeed?” he sneered—“what a pity I did not know it sooner. Children grow as thick as blackberries everywhere, and dozens may be had any day for the asking. They don’t generally pay, though, the small cormorants, in proportion to what they eat and drink; and the lady who is coming will pay handsomely, bless her liberal heart! in more ways than one. Now I say, Lillie, mind you spend that money honestly, every sou of it, in furbishing up Madame’s rooms. She has been accustomed to have things nice and elegant about her, and mustn’t miss them here—do you understand, young woman?”

“Is the lady French, then?” asked Lillie,

waiving her tyrant's question for the moment, and determined either to get at the truth or to refuse obedience to his orders.

"No—she isn't," he said, churlishly (for, knowing how suspense and uncertainty teased his wife, he was amiably grieved at having to put an end to it); "but she calls herself Madame Felice, and you'll have to call her the same. As I dare say you'll swear eternal friendship and open your hearts to each other before you've been a couple of hours together, I may as well tell you at once that this lady is Maud Carlyon, that girl old Cheviot was talking about one night at our place—your fine brother-in-law's cousin, who so mysteriously vanished from society any number of years ago. How I made her acquaintance doesn't matter; why I asked her here doesn't matter either—on both these points I choose to keep my own counsel. I invited her to come as a guest, but she, being, I suppose, rich enough to play the lady bountiful, made it a condition that she should remunerate me handsomely for her

board and lodging. It's pleasant to do business with these sort of people; and let me tell you that it will be the worse for you if you don't make yourself agreeable enough and the house comfortable enough to induce her to stay. By the bye, another of her conditions, which I don't see the drift of, is that we shall, on no account, let any member of either family, yours or hers, know of her being with us. I have given my word as a gentleman that we will be mute as the grave on the subject; and should I ever discover that you have been blabbing, I'll twist your neck for you as sure as you're alive."

Mrs. Richard Wilmot had listened with no small amount of astonishment, mingled with some degree of interest, to the above explanation. The Maud Carlyon she had heard of from Mr. Cheviot had gradually faded in her mind from the heroine of romance she had first pictured her, into something more shadowy and unreal than a vision in a dream. It was very long since she had thought of her at all; and now to be told abruptly that

this mysterious personage was coming to reside under the same roof with her, was even then on her journey, seemed as incredible to poor Lillie as any of the wildest adventures of her beloved heroes and heroines had ever done. She wanted to ask a thousand questions of her husband, and had Mr. Richard been other than he was, it is probable that his wife would have given him no peace during the whole of that evening ; but Lillie knew well that to manifest curiosity was the surest way to be left in ignorance, so she contented herself with a single comment and a single question, the latter being so purely womanly and natural that even Dick could not be incensed at it.

The comment was only "How very strange!" and the question—"Is she pretty still?"

"She's monstrous graceful and dignified still," Mr. Richard condescended to reply; "but she looks as if tears had washed all the prettiness out of her. You women are such precious fools. If an ill wind blows upon you, nothing will do but

you must cry away the freshness and the comeliness that might bring you better luck another time. By jingo ! if *my* face had been my fortune, wouldn't I have taken care of it, and chucked fretting and crying to the dogs."

It struck Lillie, and almost made her smile at the moment, that were Mr. Richard's face his fortune it was one of which he might feel perfectly secure, nobody would wish to rob him. She only said, however, referring to their future guest—

"Poor thing ! no doubt she has had cause enough for weeping. You may rest satisfied about my efforts to make her comfortable, Richard ; and now I had better go out and spend this money according to your wish."

* * * * *

It was nearly dark when Madame Felice, escorted by Mr. Wilmot, who had gone to the diligence office to meet her, walked into the room, brightened up with some fresh flowers and some

new furniture now, where Lillie waited anxiously and rather nervously to receive her.

"Here is Madame, and she's precious tired," said Mr. Richard, leading up the pale guest to his wife, "so when you've made your bows or curtseys to each other, you'd better be off to the kitchen, Lillie, and give a hand to Louise with the supper. Don't stay to palaver now."

Lillie did stay, however, to give a hand first, and a very warm and kindly hand it was, to the stranger so roughly introduced to her, and whose large, sad looking eyes had fixed themselves wistfully and eagerly on her face as if asking what it promised of sympathy and friendliness.

Apparently the inspection, even in that uncertain light, satisfied and reassured her, for abruptly dropping the hand she had half timidly taken, Madame Felice drew the astonished Lillie into her arms, and kissed her tenderly and repeatedly.

"Well," exclaimed Mr. Richard, falling into the error of a vulgar mind in thinking that this

rapid acceptance of his wife as an equal and a friend would justify any amount of familiarity from himself towards their guest—"well, if you women ain't rum fish, my name's not Dick Wilmot! I suppose as you've fallen in love with one another at first sight, I'd better go and help the gal with the supper. Kissing and slobbering may satisfy *your* delicate appetites, but, by Jove, it never could satisfy *mine*. Show Madame to her room, Lillie, and leave her in peace while she gets her things off. You'll both have plenty of time for gossiping by and bye."

"And that is *your* husband?" broke as it seemed irresistibly from the lips of Madame Felice the moment the door had closed on Mr. Richard, and before Lillie had quite recovered from the astonishment her new friend's embrace had occasioned her.

"Yes," she replied, not well knowing what else to say to a perfect stranger. "I am Mr. Wilmot's wife, and more than ready to join with him in trying to make you comfortable and happy.

You must excuse the roughness of Richard's manners. They are not agreeable manners certainly," she added, with a half smile; "but you will grow used to them in time if you remain with us, and not mind them."

"Is it because *you* have grown used to them, and do not mind them, that your young face looks prematurely old, and your pretty hair is growing thin and lustreless?" asked the elder lady in a tender, pitying voice, which went right down into the depths of poor Lillie's heart in a moment. "Gracious Heavens! what a fate it must have been for you."

"I think," said Lillie, half turning away to hide the tears her guest's unexpected and extraordinary sympathy had brought to her eyes, "I think we had better go to your room, as Louise will be wanting to come and spread the table here, and Richard does not like to be kept waiting a minute for his-supper."

"Poor child!" was the comment of the other, as she took the hand of Richard's wife that they

might not be separated. "I am very glad I have come to you."

Lillie sat down in one of the new easy chairs in Madame's room while the latter was making a hasty toilet after her journey. She would accept no assistance from her hostess although this was most pressingly offered.

"But I must learn," she said, "to wait upon myself now, that I may be no additional burden to you. Perhaps, by and bye, if I am very awkward and helpless, you will find a corner in your house for my old servant."

"Why did you not bring her with you, if you are likely to miss her services?" asked Mrs. Wilmot, beginning to be really curious to know something more of her interesting guest; "I could easily have made room."

"I left her in charge of my house at Versailles," answered Madame Felice, "until some arrangement could be thought of for the future disposal of her. But possibly you were not even aware

of my having lived so near you. I will tell you more about myself—all, indeed, that I can ever tell to anybody, when we are alone to-morrow. Do you know that your husband is going to Paris almost immediately?"

Lillie confessed that this intelligence was new to her, said how deeply interested she should be in hearing whatever Madame Félice might choose to relate of her past history, and then, seeing her companion was ready, proposed that they should return to the dining-room.

As she was moving first towards the door, the lady behind her held her back for an instant.

"We are countrywomen," she said, "and in a foreign land together. We have, besides this, bonds of sympathy that as yet you know nothing of. We are going to live under the same roof for an indefinite time. Let us waive ceremony at once, and begin by being Lillie and Maud to each other. Have you any objection to this?"

"Not the least," replied Lillie, smiling frankly and affectionately, as, with her heart warmed and

cheered as it had not been since she left Paris, she accepted another kiss from the strange companion her husband had brought her, and then hurried her into the supper-room.

CHAPTER XIV.

A LITTLE SUNSHINE.

WHEN Mr. Richard, much to the astonishment, and not a little to the disgust, of the refined gentlewoman who, for the first time, sat at table with him, had eaten and drunk of the good things before him to his heart's content; when the moment, always dreaded by him, arrived in which it became absolutely imperative upon him, in self-preservation, to say "thus far, and no farther," to his wolfish appetite, he threw his heavy body back in an easy chair, and, not knowing yet whether he might venture upon a pipe, yawned and stretched, looked as if life had ceased

for the time being to have the smallest interest for him, which in point of fact it had, and finally told his wife lazily that he was off to Paris on business the next day.

"For how long?" asked Lillie, who could not say she was sorry, and who thought it possible her face might be saying she was glad.

"The stars only know that," responded the husband, with a glance at his guest to ascertain if she was listening. "Of course it will be awful work, tearing myself from the society of you ladies, but duty, you see, must be attended to before pleasure. By George! what a nice world this would be if a fellow's conscience didn't oblige him to think of duty on all occasions when he'd like to be enjoying himself. But if I'm as lucky as I deserve to be in my present trip, why I'll treat you both to some gaieties when I come back. We'll have picnics, and rides, and drives, and sails, and all sorts of things, with lots of champagne to help to make us jolly. I told Madame, there, we'd fatten her up, and bring

some colour into her cheeks in no time, and it shan't be my fault if I don't keep my word. Dick Wilmot may be a rough diamond, but he knows how to treat a real lady when he gets hold of one."

"You are very tired, I am sure," said poor Lillie, turning with hot cheeks to her new friend, "and would like perhaps to go to bed at once. Richard will excuse us if we leave him to his cigar and his nap, and I can help you in place of your old servant. Shall we come?"

"Yes," replied the hitherto silent guest, appearing to awake, on the sound of Lillie's voice, out of a dream, and giving the impression to both her companions that Mr. Richard's eloquence had been quite thrown away upon her. "I am ready to go anywhere with you, but I am not too tired to wait upon myself. I can unpack my boxes while you sit and talk to me."

She remembered, however, before they reached the door to turn and wish her host a polite good night, even resigning her soft fingers into his

bearish grasp for a moment, and smiling courteously under the real pain he inflicted by the too friendly shake he gave them.

"I am grateful to your husband for bringing me to you, Lillie," this singular individual remarked, perhaps in explanation of her tolerance of such a man, "and henceforth you need never blush for him to me, or on my account. Nothing that he could possibly do or say would appear half so strange to me as the strange fact of his having won you for his wife. I should like to hear how that came about, and as much of your girl life as you may be disposed to tell me. By and bye I will be the narrator, and you shall be the listener."

They sat together in Madame Félice's bedroom till the long darkening evening had given place to night, and Louise had twice been to the door to tell her mistress how late it was. Poor Lillie had been so long companionless in her own home, had since her marriage met with so few to whom she could speak freely and openly of the past and

present, had never, either as a girl or matron, inspired at first sight so genuine and enthusiastic an interest as this stranger manifested in her, that it was quite natural for an impulsive character like hers to be completely won and fascinated by it, and to yield to all the wishes and entreaties of her guest without pausing to consider how far she was acting prudently in doing so.

For many days after Mr. Richard had left them to themselves, Lillie's *rôle* of chief talker continued unchanged, and there were no signs of the other's intending to fulfil her promise of relating any part of her own history. It was her delight to coax her young hostess to a little ottoman at her feet where she could hold the hands (far less white and soft now than her own), from the work she knew they detested, make the pretty head lean for support against her knees, and caress the wavy chestnut hair—lustreless as she had that first night discovered it to have grown—while Lillie talked to her of the happy youth that seemed to have receded so very far into the distance, of the

family home at Bayswater, of her parents, sisters, and brother, and in short, of everything concerning herself that had happened either then or now which did not immediately relate to, or include complaints of, the husband who had marred and blasted all her life, but whom she was pledged to shield, if she could not honour, still.

Madame Felice was not long in discovering how far she might go in her amicable probings of those deep flesh wounds which Lillie could not altogether hide, but which some peculiar sense of right—peculiar inasmuch as it is uncommon—made her shrink from either voluntarily exposing or attributing to their real and only author.

The elder lady did not openly commend or praise the injured wife for her reticence and forbearance as regarded the man she had married; albeit in the prompt and warm attachment she had conceived for Mrs. Richard Wilmot, she was wont to praise and commend her for nearly everything she did, but the daily consideration of it, of poor Lillie's patience with a vulgar and

tyrannical husband, of her lofty sense of that husband's claims upon her, of her determination without a particle of love or respect towards him, to cling to him even as he fell step by step to utter degradation and ruin—all this sank deep into the other woman's heart, biding its time to bring forth fruit of a wholesome and enduring nature.

Poor Lillie was very happy and thankful in the new interest imparted to her desolate life. It is only those who have lived long in cold regions who learn to be grateful for pale and occasional glimpses of the sun, and to accept them gladly and joyously without a too anxious enquiry as to how long they may last.

Richard away, and the companion he had brought in his place, loving her, caressing her, declaring twenty times a day that she esteemed it a rich and special privilege to share her humble and quiet home, were gleams of sunshine to Richard Wilmot's wife that warmed her whole being into something resembling its ancient and almost forgotten energy and brightness.

“Oh, what a pity you have forbidden me to tell my dear ones in England that you are with me;” she said one day as they were returning from a long ramble through some lovely scenes which they had nearly equally enjoyed. “They are picturing me alone and broken hearted, (as I was before you came) in this out of the way region, and here I am this morning as gay and happy as a bird. Dear Maud, do recall your prohibition and let me at least tell Felix. Poor kind old Felix! I used to tell him all my troubles, and it seems so hard that I must keep from him my first little bit of joy.”

Had Lillie been able to look into her companion's face, its expression would have puzzled her, and set her organs of imagination and wonder working busily; but Maud's veil was drawn tightly over her chin, and there was nothing unusual in her voice when after a minute's pause she said—

“Lillie, you must humour my caprice on this subject a little longer, and in the meanwhile

think of it as indulgently as you can. It is strange I do not hear from Edgar; he must have returned from taking your sister to Dover some days I should suppose, and even if he had not gone to look after me at the Villa, Mr. Wilmot would surely have conveyed my letter to him before this."

"What letter?" asked Lillie, who knew no more now of the origin of Maud's coming to live with her than she had known when Dick first spoke vaguely to her of that possible inmate he might bring.

"Oh," replied the other, suddenly remembering that Mr. Richard had warned her not to initiate Lillie into the secret of Elsie's jealousy and trouble, (lest it might make her unhappy, he had said). "Oh, only a letter to my cousin explaining my motives for leaving Versailles and assuring him of my safety and well being. Mr. Wilmot persuaded me that he was a safer channel of communication than the post. What do you think about it?"

"I don't think Dick is at all likely to see Mr.

Carlyon himself," Lillie frankly admitted. "They are not on friendly terms. Did your cousin never tell you as much?"

"Never. Edgar was always strangely reserved, and his own wife was the only one of all your family he ever voluntarily named to me. But my poor letter; what I wonder has become of it, and why did your husband offer to take it if he could not present it himself to Edgar."

"I don't know indeed," said Lillie, beginning to fear that Mr. Richard was playing a deeper game than she had as yet imagined; "he may possibly have lost it. Had you not better write another and send it in the usual way?"

As Maud could not reveal to Elsie's sister the objections that, according to Mr. Wilmot, existed to this plan, she waived the enquiry, and only said—

"My cousin will be terribly uneasy about me if he goes to the house before he can receive my explanation. Marie has no authority for telling him anything; she only knows indeed that I have

come to the south, and, even that, she would not reveal (without a special order from me), to save her own life. Poor, faithful old woman! I must get her here by and bye, Lillie; but I do hope no mischief will ensue in the event of my letter being lost. It was not past the post time when we came out. Perhaps I may find something at home this morning."

The only letter however they found awaiting them was one from Joanna to Lillie, written at Dover just after Mr. Carlyon had left her, and before Felix had arrived.

By this they could ascertain exactly how long Edgar must have been back in Paris, and Maud felt sure now that as he had had ample time to discover her flight, he must, supposing her communication had not yet reached him, be enduring a world of anxiety on her account.

"And Heaven knows I have given him enough already, poor fellow!" she said, as Lillie retired to read over her own precious letter a second time.

And then, for want of a better alternative, Mand sat down and scribbled off a few hasty lines to Mr. Carlyon, senior, which she took herself to the post.

CHAPTER XV.

MURDER !

It was in the very midst of Edgar Carlyon's most active exertions (assisted now by the chief of the police, by his father, and by Mr. Carus Cheviot) to gain tidings of his lost wife—it was, I repeat, in the very midst of these exertions, which, combined with mental anxiety were beginning to tell cruelly upon his health and strength, that he one day entered a carriage on the Versailles railway, and was conveyed swiftly to that same terminus near which not so very long ago he had parted, with scornful words and angry threats, from Mr. Richard Wilmot, the gentleman who might have foregone revenge for the sake of the golden coins

he loved, but who getting kicks instead of half-pence, had been fain to remember that revenge was passing sweet, and open alike to the poor man and the rich.

Mr. Edgar Carlyon was certainly not thinking at all of that stormy interview with his wife's obtrusive connection, as he passed now over the ground which had witnessed their quarrel. He was weighed down with thoughts and anxieties of a much more personal nature, and he was, unconsciously, giving himself some credit for his present effort in coming to enquire after the health of a cousin, at a time when his mind was torn and racked with doubts and apprehensions as to the fate of his wife.

Edgar Carlyon was a man who must inevitably do whatever commended itself to his reason or judgment as right and fitting to be done. He knew it was right and fitting, under all difficulties or hindrances, that he and his father, he especially, should pay every attention and respect to this cousin Maud, and so he was going to see

her in the very midst of his great trouble and perplexity, and he could not help encouraging himself by a little quiet "well done," as he went on his solitary way.

Half an hour later, he was back again at the station, his face even more perplexed and anxious than it had been before, with a good deal of irritation and annoyance plainly to be discerned on the fine features which owed their chief beauty to their ordinary aspect of dignified repose.

On arriving at Paris, Mr. Edgar (whose spirits had been further chafed on that homeward journey by having for a *tête-à-tête* companion, in the carriage he had entered, his wife's music master, Monsieur Ravina) summoned a conveyance, and was driven straight to his father's apartments.

The old gentleman, who had entered heart and soul into all the recent distress and anxiety on the missing wife's account, welcomed his son with a look of affectionate sympathy, and enquired eagerly whether he brought him any news.

"Yes," said Edgar, in his somewhat brief manner, "but not of Elsie. I have been to Versailles this afternoon, and found Maud gone from the place altogether—no note left, no explanation of any kind. The old woman still in charge, but obstinate as a mule. She declares she knows nothing beyond the fact that her lady was tired of the neighbourhood, and has left it, probably for ever. I am convinced that this is untrue, the woman's assertion I mean, and that she is far less ignorant than she pretends to be. However, I could get no more out of her either by threats or entreaties, and I left her in disgust at last, as a crowd was beginning to gather round the gates to discover, I suppose, the meaning of the high words between us. I heard afterwards in a cigar shop that all sorts of foolish reports are afloat on the subject of Madame Felice's sudden disappearance from the neighbourhood. This would scarcely have been the case had not some one taken the trouble to talk it into a mystery, and my own firm conviction is that Richard Wil-

mot will be found to be at the bottom both of Maud's unexplained absence, and of the scandalous stories that have been propagated in connection with it."

"Nothing more likely," replied Mr. Carlyon, to whom his son rarely spoke on the subject of his detested brother-in-law; "but what can such a fellow have said or done to persuade Maud, half cracked as we know she is, to run away without your consent or approval; and how, indeed, can he have obtained access to her at all?"

"Heaven only knows!" said Edgar, gloomily; "but when I questioned Marie closely as to whether any stranger had had speech with her mistress lately, she grew red and confused, and there was something in her denials which convinced me they were altogether false. In any case, if that low, cunning rogue has managed to deceive and entrap poor Maud, we are tolerably sure that she has not been his first victim."

"The fellow ought to have had a halter round his ugly neck years ago," exclaimed the old gen-

tleman, excitedly ; " and it must be our business, as soon as we can get hold of our silly strayed sheep, to bring these little actionable plots home to him. He is not in Paris now, is he ? "

" I believe not—at any rate he professed to have removed to the south when he sent for his wife to join him. If it were not for the unspeakable horror I have of meeting him face to face, my next move should be to run down to their home near Marseilles and see if I could find out anything from that poor young woman. She may be ignorant of her sister's flight, and yet have some knowledge of the wicked machinations which probably led to it. "

" This is not a bad idea, Edgar, " said the father, who felt that constant action was just now the best thing for his son's harassed mind. " Is it not even possible that by this time your misguided wife may have taken refuge at her sister's ; they were uncommonly fond of each other. "

" No, " Edgar answered decisively ; " Mrs.

Wilmot is one of the last women in the world to countenance the folly of which my poor Elsie has been guilty; she would persuade her to return to her home immediately, and then, too, Elsie distinctly avowed her intention, in that letter she left for me, to go to her brother in England. I think I can depend wholly upon her truthfulness."

The old gentleman said nothing in reply to this—had he not kept a still tongue in his head on more than one occasion lately, when Edgar had expressed similar confidence in his wife? for had he not remembered that this wife was of his own choosing?—but he had, nevertheless, his private thoughts on the subject, and if these thoughts were not altogether complimentary to his fair daughter-in-law, it must be borne in mind that Elsie's own brother, who loved her fondly, had a little while ago cherished pretty nearly the same.

"I will go over to Versailles once more," exclaimed Edgar abruptly, finding that Mr. Carlyon had relapsed into silence, "and insist upon that

stubborn old woman's giving me Maud's address. I must not be without the means of disproving all my wife's foolish suspicions the moment I am happy enough to discover her hiding place. Mr. Cheviot encourages me greatly in hoping that Madame Le Clerc may assist us when she comes back to Paris. The very fact of her having gone away so suddenly, and without leaving a clue with anyone as to where she was going, is in our favour. Elsie trusted this woman, and would have been more likely to have asked help or counsel from her, than from any other of her acquaintances in Paris. But it strikes me, sir," he added abruptly, and a little severely, "that you have never quite entered into these hopes suggested by our kind old friend."

It was true that Mr. Carlyon had not done so. He could not help,—not having seen Elsie's letter to her husband, having been only vaguely informed that it hinted at jealousy on her own part—he could not help, I say, viewing the whole matter now as half the men in the world would have

viewed it, and attributing Elsie's flight to motives wholly unconnected with jealousy or suspicion of her husband. But while there remained the shadow of a chance that he might be mistaken, he loved his son too well, and pitied him too deeply, to breathe a word that might lead to a betrayal of his own thoughts on the subject. He only said now, in deprecation of Edgar's displeasure—

“Old men, you see, my good fellow, are not so sanguine as young ones, unless indeed, like Mr. Cheviot, they carry all the best part of their youth into their old age. I have not done so, unfortunately, but you are sure of one thing, Edgar, and that is that my satisfaction on the recovery of your wife will only be second to your own.”

“I firmly believe it,” replied Edgar, extending his hand and looking really sorry for having spoken coldly to so affectionate a parent; “and now as it is close upon the English post time I will go home and write my long delayed letter to

Felix Paget. I am afraid he will owe me a grudge for not having done it sooner; but each day I have hoped against hope to have some cheering news to send him. We shall meet at seven."

But it happened that the old gentleman did not feel very well after his son had left him, and so he sent round an excuse for not leaving home that evening, with a promise of breakfasting at the house the next morning instead.

And thus it came about that when father and son met again, they had each of them a piece of news of a most startling kind to communicate to the other.

Mr. Carlyon, who, contrary to his usual habit, had arrived in a public conveyance, hurried up to the breakfast room with a face so full of distress and agitation that Edgar, even in the midst of his own intense pre-occupation, was for a moment struck by it. Having seated himself upon the first chair he came to, and drawn a few deep breaths as if the effort of mounting the stairs had

exhausted him, the old gentleman was on the point of delivering his strange tidings when his eye was attracted first to an open letter on the table, and from that to the cold, rigid, but withal anguished countenance of his son.

. "For God's sake what is the matter, Edgar?" he enquired excitedly; "what is in that letter? you have had news of your wife—"

Edgar raised his eyes slowly to his father's face, and looked at him for quite a minute in the fixed, unconscious way we often look at those who speak to us, while our minds are still under the influence of a recent shock or surprise. At the end of that time he appeared to come to himself, and then he said courteously, "I beg your pardon, sir," and without another word handed the open letter across the table to his mystified guest.

It was the letter with which the reader is already familiar, from Felix Paget to Elsie's husband, written on the night of that unhappy child's arrival under her brother's roof.

To the elder Mr. Carlyon, whose mind had so far outrun the truth in its conjectures as to Elsie's fate, this letter brought positive relief and comfort. Anything, he reasoned, death itself, or madness, would be preferable to what he had feared, and though it was true that Elsie's brother—a skilful doctor—gave a sad account of her present state, she was so young and her misery was so purely of her own making, so capable of being explained away—

But at this point of the old gentleman's reflections he looked up suddenly at Edgar, and the same idea appeared reflected from the one mind to the other at the same instant, Edgar giving expression to it in a tone of bitterness and despair that the father shuddered to note, with his own tidings yet undivulged.

“How am I to take her the full and satisfactory explanation which can alone save her, without first seeing Maud? Oh fool, fool that I was, ever to bind myself by an oath to keep

that girl's [wretched secret! my wife will be a sacrifice to my insanity."

"Not so, not so," replied Mr. Carlyon soothingly; "you can go over to your wife and tell her you have a cousin whom you were bound to visit occasionally, that she is in fact a married woman and nothing to you. Elsie will hear reason from your own lips—the child is evidently as fond of you as ever, in spite of her silly jealousy. Come come, don't make too much of this difficulty about Maud, Edgar. She will be sure to turn up again by and bye, and then we can persuade her to forego all that nonsense in reference to the Paget family. The girl is half cracked, as I said yesterday, and you have given in to her whims far too much already."

"It may be so," said the son, with increasing gloom and despondency in his voice, "but in my creed an oath is binding to whomsoever it is made, until that person gives a release from it. My oath to Maud forbids my naming her at all,

even as my cousin, to any single member of my wife's family, and you yourself, sir, are not aware, nobody is aware, of all the motives which have actuated me in my kindness and attention to our unhappy relative. I owe her a debt of gratitude that it will be impossible for me ever to repay."

Mr. Carlyon, senior, who was not gifted with many of the finer feelings of our usually coarse humanity, had a strong inclination to reply "Stuff and nonsense!" to this assertion of his son's; but he checked the impulse, and, slowly folding up Dr. Paget's letter, enquired of Edgar what he thought, then, of doing.

"Of taking the first train to Versailles with a *sergent de police* at my side, and thus frightening Marie into telling me where her mistress is to be found. There is evidently not an instant to be lost—Felix Paget is not a man to exaggerate—but why do you look so strangely at me, sir?" he added, breaking off abruptly in his observations; "now I think of it, you came in with an

excited face just now, only I was too absorbed with my own agitating news to ask the meaning of it. Pray relieve my suspense at once. Have you heard anything either of Maud or Elsie?"

"Nothing at all," replied the old gentleman, again breathing heavily, and becoming a shade or two paler than he had been while discussing his daughter-in-law's affairs; "but there is a horrible report this morning in the city to the effect that a poor old woman has been murdered since yesterday in a lonely house, a white villa, just outside the town of Versailles. We must have a cup of coffee, Edgar, as soon as possible, and then go and find out the truth of this terrible story. It has naturally upset me very much, for of course there can be little doubt that the old woman is Maud's servant whom you quarrelled with only yesterday. I doubt if you *could* go to England till an investigation into this matter, if the report prove really true, has taken place."

Mr. Edgar Carlyon made no single comment upon his father's startling communication. He

only covered his white, horror stricken face, and sat meditating upon the possible consequences to himself and Elsie of this new and extraordinary calamity.

CHAPTER XVI.

TOLD IN THE TWILIGHT.

"WHY don't you wear a wedding ring?" said Lillie to her guest and friend one night, when, in idle mood, which Maud always loved to encourage in her, she was sitting at the other's feet and playing with her long, white fingers. "Has Monsieur Felice been dead many years?"

Maud answered this question oddly. "When you were a child," she asked, "did you love to sit in the twilight, or in the gloaming, as poets call it, and listen to fairy tales, Lillie?"

"Oh, beyond everything," acknowledged Lillie, eagerly; "but you know listening to or reading

tales, has been my weakness since I was a baby. I believe I never in my life read so little as since you have been with me. Dear Maud, you have been better to me than a thousand romances, or a whole library of fairy tales."

"Thank you," said Maud, smiling with as much sweetness as sadness now, for Lillie Wilmot's society and friendship had marvellously illuminated all the dark places in her heart; "but as you must miss your pretty books, Lillie, I think to-night, in this soft autumn twilight, I will tell you a story that may serve to amuse or interest you in the absence of more exciting narratives. What sort of tales do you prefer?"

"Oh I like plenty of love," answered Lillie, guessing that the long delayed promise was about to be fulfilled at last; "and not too much misunderstanding between the lovers, and as few tears, and deaths, and funerals as possible, with of course a happy marriage in the end."

"Ah, then I fear," sighed Madame Felice, "that a story which would begin with an unhappy

marriage would have little or no interest for you. Poor child, your own reality may well have sickened you of that kind of thing in fiction."

"My own reality," said Lillie in a low voice, as she pressed very tenderly the soft hand she was still holding, "has at least given me the right and the power to sympathise truly and deeply in all suffering that comes into a woman's lot. Dear Maud, tell me your story to-night, and give me credit for so much of affection towards yourself as shall create an interest in the dulllest narrative of which you are the heroine."

"A miserable heroine I have been," responded Maud with sudden bitterness; "but you shall have your wish, Lillie, and then judge for yourself. I will open for your inspection now the wounds which have been hidden, while still unhealed, for many weary years. You shall learn what no other human being, except my cousin Edgar, and the dead, have ever known, and I will not even ask you to respect the confidence I repose in you. I will yield you free permission to do with it what

you think best, for I am losing faith in my own judgment and principles, in myself altogether; and I have full and unlimited trust in you."

"Dear Maud, I wish I deserved such trust," said Lillie, humbly; "but do please begin at once. Who knows whether Dick may not arrive and interrupt us."

"To begin then, Lillie, I must say a few words about my aunt, Mrs. Carlyon, the only woman friend I ever had till I knew you. She took me, as a little sickly orphan, to live with her and be as her own child. She was very, very good, and tender and indulgent to me always. You must remember this, if what you hear later surprises you. Mrs. Carlyon was a handsome woman, clever and brilliant too, to some extent, and a great favorite in society. As far as I can remember, she generally acted upon impulse, had warm, impressionable feelings, and was less troubled with scruples about right and wrong, when her pleasure was in question than well brought up Englishwomen are supposed mostly to be. Mr. Carlyon was many years her

senior, and there was little enough of love between the two, Edgar (who loved his mother passionately) being the sole link, as I believe, that kept them even outwardly together. My cousin Edgar and myself were like brother and sister, and though there was never the shadow of any warmer feeling on either side, he always said as a boy that I should share his fortune, having next to nothing of my own, when we were both grown up. Soon after that time arrived, he took it into his head to travel, and while sojourning for a short time in Egypt, I believe he wrote to ask his father if he would like to join him there, and then that they could return in company. Mr. Carlyon went, and the wife and I remained alone in Paris, going a good deal into society, and enjoying ourselves according to our respective tastes and inclinations. Lillie, you can understand that I should be devotedly attached to this attractive woman, who had been kinder than the kindest mother to me, inasmuch as she never thwarted me in anything, and only blamed me that I did not put her indul-

gence and affection to harder tests. I *was* attached to her, and the faults I could not help seeing almost lost in my eyes the aspect of wrong doing through the tender love I bore her. But you, around whom this ill-fated being never had a chance of weaving her magic spells, will be shocked to hear that in Mr. Carlyon's absence his wife deemed it no shame to have lovers sighing at her feet—nay, that she openly confessed to me, in reference to one man younger than herself, that she would give up all for him, country, home, husband, and reputation, if he asked her to do so. I don't think he ever did ask her to do so, but he admired her, and his vanity was gratified by her evident preference; and certain it is that he was always in our train. Of course my aunt knew that we were talked about; I say "we," because though I had no acknowledged lovers or favorites of my own at that time, my name was necessarily associated with hers, and I was supposed to countenance and approve all she did. With regard to the one man I have just mentioned, the fact of

his being so much younger than Mrs. Carlyon caused many persons in our society to set him down as an admirer of mine, and as he had a wife living I need scarcely tell you that the mistake was greatly to my disadvantage. I did not, however, mind this particularly then. I had, you must remember, been brought up by Mrs. Carlyon, whose principles were none of the strictest, and in Edgar's absence nobody but herself cared two straws about me. I always felt that I could become anything, go to the very extreme of good or bad for one I loved, and who returned my affection; but people called me proud and haughty, and I was literally without a single friend. After awhile my aunt's devoted admirer grew weary either of her or of her exactions, and little by little he fell away from us, and at last left Paris altogether. Lillie, I am perfectly certain that this man was the real cause of my poor aunt's death; I cannot help both thinking and speaking tenderly of her still, you see; she drooped and faded from the time he deserted her, and would

scarcely appear in society at all. And then my turn came."

"Oh, I am so glad," interrupted Lillie, at this point. "I really cannot like this flighty aunt of yours one bit, Maud, and I was hoping you would soon have done with her and come to your own story. Now then for Monsieur Felice."

"Yes, now for Monsieur Felice," said Maud, with an odd smile. "You won't care to know of what country he was, or whence he came; at any rate we will leave these indifferent points till by and bye. Suffice it that he was my hero—my beau ideal, the man, of all the wide world of men, whom I felt at once I could love, respect, worship, with every faculty of my heart, and mind, and soul. He was on a visit to Mrs. Carlyon, stopping in the same house with us. I was pretty in those days, Lillie, and, as I have said before, we were leading a very quiet life now, and so he fell in love with me in the blind, unreasoning, passionate way that these grave, good men, sometimes do fall in love with merely pretty women. My

aunt neither encouraged nor discouraged our attachment; she only warned me that my uncle and cousin would certainly disapprove of Monsieur Felice as a husband for me, and he on his part acknowledged frankly that my poverty would be a barrier to any cheerful acceptance of me as a daughter by his own parents. Well, all this was against us, but we were too deeply in love to think of obstacles, or of anything, indeed, but the speedy accomplishment of our wishes, which pointed to a home together, however humble, and the joining of our hands in the only manner which would defy human interference or opposition to disunite us. So we were married privately, Lillie, by the tires both of his church and mine; and in the first flush of our happiness we went to live at a quiet village sufficiently near to Paris for my aunt to drive out nearly daily to see us.

“I am sure now that she felt at that time she was dying, and was glad to know that I had married a good, upright man, who would be kind to me and take care of me all my life through.

It was settled amongst us, that when Mr. Carlyon and Edgar returned, we should obtain their forgiveness, and after that was accomplished, that my husband should take me to England and present me to his family. There would be nothing gained, he said, in disclosing his marriage sooner, and his parents would be likely to regard it with less displeasure if Mr. Carlyon had been won to give his countenance to it. So far, you see, Lillie, everything was comparatively bright and smiling in our prospects ; but the days of darkness were even then at hand. My husband had not come to Paris wholly for his own amusement. He had business to transact for his father's house which required still his occasional presence in the city, but I was rarely dull in his absence, as each return was a new and delicious pleasure to me, and I was looking forward to it throughout all the long days. One evening—the very remembrance of it makes me shudder even now—he entered the room where I had been watching for him at the window, with a countenance so

changed, so white, so stern, so brooding and miserable, that I scarcely recognised him. Without any sort of preparation, he came up to me, took both my hands and held them tightly in his own, and said, in a voice that sounded positively awful to me, 'Maud, I must have the truth from you at once, as you value my reason or my life. I have heard you lightly spoken of to-day, have heard your name coupled with that of a known libertine and a married man. Thank God, he who spoke had no suspicion that he was murdering the reputation of *my wife*; but he did murder it cruelly and pitilessly if his slander was untrue, justly and even righteously if it was otherwise. Now speak instantly, Maud, before you have time for reflection.'

"Lillie, I don't know what a less proud or a less loving woman would have done under the same terrible circumstances, but in my case both my love and my pride united in making me resent, as the bitterest wrong, as the most heartless insult, this startling address and peremptory command from

the man I had married. I did, therefore, speak instantly as he had willed me to do. I said, calmly and coldly, while there was a fire consuming my heart, 'I will never contradict what you have heard. You can think of me as you please. I am ready to leave you to-morrow.' I don't believe he understood that last assertion, for with my first words he had begun to pace the room wildly in a perfect agony of grief and shame—shame for me, Lillie, because I was his wife, and he chose to believe me unworthy of that distinction. I have said that wounded love and pride were mainly instrumental in dictating my first appropriation of the evil-doing attributed to me; but I have no doubt that in the end my husband's anguish would have conquered me, and won from me the truth, if during his paroxysm of excitement I had not reflected that in justifying myself I must criminate my aunt—the aunt who was kinder to me than ever, who daily loaded me with gifts, and whom, moreover, I believed then to be dying. Did the man who had just so

grossly insulted me deserve that I should sacrifice her for him? I thought not, but was still debating in my mind the important question, when, with a passionate gesture, my husband suddenly exclaimed, 'I would give my right hand, nay, both my hands, and arms too, to be a free man again! How shall I present a woman with a blemished reputation to my innocent and pure-minded sisters?' Lillie, I felt mad at that moment. I think, had there been any weapon at hand, I should have killed myself in his sight. As it was, I fell on my knees and swore a solemn oath that I would leave him the next day for ever, and that as far as I could hinder it, no sister or mother of his should ever hear of my existence.

"We were both, I am convinced, beside ourselves that night, and acted under impulses with which our real natures had nothing to do. But mark how destiny was uniting with our own mad passions to separate the lives which only a few weeks ago we had so solemnly bound fast to-

gether. While we were yet slaying each other, and slaying our love too, with bitter and angry words, my uncle Mr. Carlyon, of whose arrival I had previously no idea, suddenly walked in, and demanded an explanation of the extraordinary scene he had interrupted. He had come, if not to congratulate, at least to forgive, his wilful niece, and to extend the hand of friendship to her husband. He found us mad, with apparent hatred and animosity already virtually separating us. Naturally, he espoused my cause against my husband, and at my own passionate entreaty took me away that same hour with him. I could not tell him all, on his wife's account, but I told my cousin Edgar, and implored them to let me go by myself to some secluded place hundreds of miles from Paris, and live on the little money I possessed which my aunt had seen settled on me before my hasty marriage. They both sincerely pitied me, and Edgar thanked me even extravagantly for having saved his mother's reputa-

tion, as far as my husband was concerned, in taking her shame upon myself.

“My poor aunt was judged to be too ill and nervous at that time to hear safely the story of my wrongs and misery, so the father and son accompanied me themselves to a small town in Brittany where a distant relative of the family resided, and placed me under this woman's care. They told Mrs. Carlyon that Monsieur Felice had been suddenly summoned to England and had taken me with him, and invented some other plausible pretext for their journey northwards. I am sure they neither of them even suspected then how very ill my aunt really was, and for my own part I was too absorbed in the contemplation of my personal sorrows, to have a thought to bestow upon those of other people. Nevertheless the shock was none the less great when immediately after the return of my uncle and cousin to Paris, the news reached me that they had found Mrs. Carlyon dead on their arrival.

“ Lillie, I must hurry over the remainder of my story, for I fear I have made it too long even for your patience already. I had scarcely recovered from my first sincere mourning for my aunt when, to my surprise and bewilderment, I learned that I was about to become a mother—a mother with no recognized father for my child, with no name, with no home, and with a half broken heart to begin a mother's duties. But by and bye all things wore a different aspect. My darling was born—it was a girl with its father's eyes, and for four years—nearly five—during which my baby was spared to me I was almost perfectly happy. I dare not dwell upon this time, Lillie, much less upon that which followed, upon the dark, dark, desolate days when a little grave in a foreign cemetery was all that remained to me of my too brief but wholly satisfying gladness.

“ I can only suppose, as an explanation of my feelings at that period of my life, that the maternal instinct is strong enough in my nature to triumph

over every other. I know that while my darling lived I never missed her father, I never yearned for any other human love than was expressed daily and hourly for me in those tender, laughing eyes, in those outstretched arms, and in that crowing voice of infantine delight whenever I approached her. But the moment she was taken from me the intolerable craving of my desolate heart for a husband's sympathy and affection returned with tenfold power, and I felt that I must go to him, tell him my new and bitter grief, and then die, if he spurned me still, at his feet. I had seen my cousin very rarely during those five years, but we had written to each other from time to time, and I knew that he was going with his father to England, to the country where I believed my husband to be. I went there too, Lillie. I found Edgar; I told him I was nearly mad, and that I wanted to have one more interview with my husband. But my cousin hated him, and persuaded me that I should only meet with scorn and contempt. Perhaps he was right.

God alone knows, but I have often since bitterly repented that I did not act upon the suggestions of my own heart, which could scarcely have experienced keener sorrow, however he might have trampled on it, than it had already done. This was at the time of Edgar's engagement to your sister. He persuaded me to return to Paris or the neighbourhood of Paris, and live quietly for a little while, and when I pleaded my utter loneliness and misery he promised as soon as he was settled there to see me constantly, and to do all in his power to lighten the heavy burden of my life—"

"O h," said Lillie, once more interrupting her friend, "why ever did he not suggest your living altogether with him and Elsie. And why have you never even been introduced to my dear little sister?"

"For an answer to these questions," resumed Maud, "you must wait till my story is finished, dear Lillie. It is nearly done now. I returned to Paris and remained there with my old Marie

till Edgar's wedding was over, when my uncle came back and visited me often in my lonely home. But I was unutterably wretched and restless at that time, and the old man, I believe, began to consider me really mad. At last Edgar and his young wife arrived, and I welcomed and clung to him as my only friend, teasing him, I am afraid, to come to me much oftener than would have been consistent with his duties to his bride. Mr. Carlyon at any rate thought so, and recommended my being removed to Versailles. They were very good to me, they let me want for nothing, and I was passive in their hands, growing day by day and month by month more weary of life, more impatient for the long rest of the grave. Then your husband came to me; his errand I have promised not to reveal, but the result of our first and only interview, prior to my leaving Versailles, was my acceptance of his invitation to share your home. Lillie, you were scarcely a stranger to me; I longed to see you, to create for myself if possible a place in your affec-

tions. I loved you before we met, for another's sake. I love you now for your own. You have changed unconsciously all my notions of a wife's duties; you have compelled me to break the sinful, passionate oath I made so many years ago. Lillie, we are sisters as well as friends, for my husband, the husband I still dearly love, is your brother Felix! and so ends my story."

She was weeping in Lillie's encircling arms, drinking in greedily every tender word that this half bewildered but wholly delighted sister was uttering. They were both in the very first ecstasy of their newly acknowledged relationship, asking and answering questions almost too rapidly for understanding what was either asked or answered, when a heavy footstep suddenly sounded on the stairs, and Lillie's thoughtless prophecy came to pass in the entirely unexpected and most unwelcome appearance of Mr. Richard Wilmot.

CHAPTER XVII.

MR. RICHARD'S "DUTY" OBLIGATIONS.

WHATEVER might have been the duties which had called Mr. Wilmot to Paris, it did not appear that the fulfilment of them had improved either the temper or the spirits of that gentleman. In all poor Lillie's painful experience of his various moods, she never remembered to have seen him so savage, so tyrannical, so detestable altogether, as he showed himself that night of his unexpected arrival at home.

As usual, he was as hungry as a wolf, and there was nothing in the house more substantial than bread and butter, and eggs, for him to eat. On account of this misfortune—it was a real one

to Mr. Dick—he swore at Louise, he swore doubly at his wife, he scowled even at Madame Felice, because she suggested that many a starving man would be able to dine sumptuously off eggs and bread and butter; and finally, he almost drove Louise, who, luckily, did not care for him one bit, out into the village to knock up the butcher if he was in bed, and compel him to sell some meat.

All this, however, took time, and, having nothing better to do in the interval of his compulsory waiting, Mr. Richard improved the occasion by calling his wife ugly names, by threatening to throw something at her head if she ventured to answer him, and by giving the broadest and most unequivocal hints to their guest that he wanted her out of the room.

But Maud, though secretly terrified beyond measure at the language and conduct of Lillie's disreputable husband, had an idea that her presence might be a little restraint upon him, and at any rate, save the poor wife from actual violence

at his hands. So she turned a deaf ear to all his insinuations of her being just now in the way, and endeavoured more than once to draw his attention from Lillie to herself.

At length she bethought her of the commission he had undertaken to fulfil for her, and, notwithstanding her conviction that he had never intended to do it, she asked him politely, as if nothing doubting his good faith, whether her letter to her cousin had been safely delivered.

"You make your mind quite easy about that, Madame," replied the gentleman, evidently chafing at having to modulate his savage voice into one of at least decent courtesy; "but you see," he added, with a sneer and almost a chuckle that was intended for both the ladies, "Mr. Edgar Carlyon is not likely just now to pay much attention to your communication, however interesting, under ordinary circumstances, it might have proved to him. When a man has lost his wife, he must, at least, put on the appearance of being absorbed in his affliction—"

"Lost his wife!" Lillie almost shrieked, before the words were well out of her husband's mouth. "Dick, it is not true. You would never speak so calmly if anything had happened to my darling Elsie. Don't torture me in this way, I implore of you, Richard—say it is not true."

"Only hear her, Madame," returned the tyrant, fairly laughing now, either at his wife's excitement, or because he heard the welcome sound of plates rattling on the stairs; "only hear this excellent wife of mine attributing to me—her brutal husband—enough of human feeling as would suffice to make me otherwise than calm had anything serious happened to Mistress Elsie. Well, come, now, as you give me credit for a virtue I am not at all sure of possessing, I will relieve your suspense about your pretty little sister whom I have been monstrous fond of ever since the day she gave me such a famous bottle of champagne, and would have given me brandy, too, if you and her fool of a husband hadn't come in and

prevented it. Bless her heart! she's worth all the rest of the family put together; but she has, unfortunately, taken some nonsense into her head—at least, I suppose that's it—and run away from her home and the charming Mr. Edgar. There's been a pretty hue and cry after her, I can tell you, but they haven't found her yet—she's a sly one, she is, for all her innocent looks. Come, come, no hysterics, my lady, if you please, just as a fellow's dinner is on the stairs" (this was to his wife, who had covered her face, and otherwise shown signs of uncontrollable agitation). "I happen to have my agents and spies here and there, and so I know that by this time Mistress Elsie is safely landed in England. Don't be a fool, Lillie, or I'll pitch a whole jug of cold water over you. They'll come together again like turtle doves after this little misunderstanding. Anyhow, young woman, you'll find no time to waste in piping your eye about other people's affairs. There's work enough marked out for you to keep you quiet for a day or two. Only wait till I've

had a mouthful of food, and you'll hear something that may astonish you."

Poor Lillie had already done that, and so had the lady whom henceforth we may call Mrs. Felix Paget. In her most extravagant imaginings concerning all the mischief her early error might occasion, she had never contemplated the possibility of its separating Edgar and his wife—she had been truly and deeply grieved on learning that the latter had suffered a single pang of jealousy on her account; and the news that Mr. Richard now brought filled her heart with bitter sorrow and repentance.

While the master of the house was devouring his supper, and for the time being leaving the women in peace, Maud invented and rejected a dozen plans for the speedy undoing of the great evil she knew now, for certain, that she had done. Her final resolve was to write immediately to Edgar, yielding him full permission to tell his wife everything, and in the event of Elsie not being found by the time he could reply to her, to

go herself to England in search of her missing sister-in-law. Perhaps even to her own heart Maud did not acknowledge that any motive or any hope, apart from Edgar's wife, was influencing her in forming this last determination.

And while she sat alone near the window, which was the farthest point from Mr. Richard she could conveniently retire to, without leaving the room, poor Lillie had to remain, in obedience to orders, close to the table, that her imperious master might see she was neither crying nor making any sort of fuss.

He was a long time over his meal, and his wife observed that, during its progress, he often stopped eating suddenly, and appeared to be listening for some expected sound. But nothing unusual occurred, and by and bye the delight of feeding came to an end, and this human wolf desired that all might be cleared away and his meerschaum and some brandy brought to him.

"Don't have any more spirits to-night,

Richard," pleaded Lillie in a low voice; "you know you have been drinking too much already. Please let me make you a nice cup of coffee instead."

"Go to Jericho," thundered Mr. Dick, "with your coffee and your canting nonsense. I shall have just whatever I please, as you ought to know by this time. Now sit down again," (for poor Lillie had risen in her eagerness to substitute the harmless beverage for the poisonous one) "and keep quiet if you can, while I talk to you about what I said might astonish your weak mind. If Madame there chooses to stay and doesn't mind a bit of smoke, why she's welcome to hear it too. In fact it may indirectly concern her."

Maud simply bowed and kept her seat by the window, while the wife, utterly crushed and subdued by what she had already heard, resumed her former place, and answered her tyrant never a word.

"Now it's just this," continued Mr. Richard,

as he loaded his pipe with the coarse tobacco he loved, and once more as he did so appeared to be listening intently for a second or two, "the important duties that took me to Paris last week will now unfortunately oblige me to make rather a longer journey ; indeed not to mince matters, I must start from Marseilles by a boat leaving that place the day after to-morrow. I may be going to Italy, just, you know, to amuse myself like a gentleman in wandering amidst the orange groves, and making love (with a guitar round my neck) to the dark eyed signoras. I may be going to Algiers, or to Japan, or to Constantinople, or to the Fiddle-de-dee islands—what does it matter ? I'm a citizen of the world, and like my renowned friend Lord Bateman *all* foreign countries are the same to me. The one grand point for you ladies to take in is that I'm going somewhere, and that that somewhere will be a goodish number of miles from sunny France, and "merrie" England. It is for my beloved and dutiful wife to decide whether or no she will be the companion

of my exile, for the stars only know if I shall ever come back again. It isn't every husband who would give his wife a choice in the matter, but it pleases me, of my clemency, to do so, and she may take twelve hours to make up her mind on the subject. Anyhow, *my* things must be got ready immediately—and now I've said my say, and would as soon be left alone for the rest of the evening. You and Madame can go and hold a palaver in one of your bedrooms."

A permission of which both the women gladly and eagerly availed themselves, though for a long time after they were closely shut in together, Lillie's hitherto pent up tears came so fast and impetuously that what Mr. Dick called "a palaver" was quite out of the question. When she was calm enough to listen to her friend, Maud tried to comfort her first on the subject of Elsie, mentioning her own resolve of going to England in search of her, and then taking Lillie in her arms, as if she could thus more strongly enforce her words, she said eagerly and entreatingly—

"Of course you will at once decide on letting that man go to his foreign country alone. It cannot be your duty, Lillie, to go with him."

"I will tell you at the end of the twelve hours," said poor Lillie in an utterly broken-hearted tone, that boded ill for Maud's wishes in the matter. "I would far rather Dick had not given me a choice, and I believe he knew this. God only," she added, with bowed head and choking voice, "can help me through the work and the struggle of these next twelve hours. They will be harder than all the rest of my life put together."

And doubtless they were; but poor Lillie, brave Lillie! was not going to be a deserter from her post in the hour of extremest danger. She announced to her husband in the morning that she would go with him to that unknown land he was bound for; and even he, with all his brutality and hard-heartedness, was for the moment touched by such sublime devotedness to duty; and for the first time since his downward course had com-

menced, he kissed the pale, tear-stained cheek upon the pillow by his side, and said, "Well done, old woman!"

It must be acknowledged that this conjugal tenderness from her bearish lord was less a reward to Lillie for the enormous sacrifice she was making for him, than a letter which came to her by post from her sister Joanna, written to reassure her, in the event of her having heard anything of Elsie's flight, by giving her the news of that wilful young person's safe location beneath her own (Joanna's) roof. Very little was said of Mrs. Edgar's illness either of mind or body, as Joanna was hopeful concerning both, and would not unnecessarily alarm her always harassed and unhappy sister. So Lillie, poor shorn lamb that she was! had the wind tempered to her, through the medium of this English letter; and when she went at a later hour into Maud's room her face had partially regained its ordinary expression, and her voice was firm and clear if not quite cheerful.

“We shall have to part, dearest,” she said, stooping to embrace with tender affection her newly discovered sister—“and the parting will be so hard to me that you must be generous, and neither by word nor look of sorrow or reproach make it harder. Here is a letter from Joanna, who has got my darling Elsie safe under her care—thank God for that?—but, Maud, you can still go to England when we leave this, if you will. I have written a letter which I should like you to take, which it is my last prayer to you that you *will* take to Felix. I know when he reads it, all will be clear to him in a moment; he will see that if you sinned, he sinned first and least excusably—and in my banishment from you all, I shall feel happy, dearest Maud, in believing that you and my brother, my kind old Felix! are happy and blessed at last in each other. You will do this, won’t you?”

“Lillie,” replied Maud enthusiastically, though hot tears were nearly blinding her, “if I hated my husband as much as I truly love him, I would,

to please you, go to him on my knees, and ask him to receive me back again. I wish all bad or indifferent or discontented wives could come to you—you marvellous child—to learn a wife's duty."

All that day Lillie had to work like a galley slave in making preparations for their hurried departure. Her husband came in and out, looked at what she was doing, gave orders, stormed at her sometimes, and at other times only stood by with a face of unutterable gloom and dispondency. Always it struck his wife that he was on the watch for something or somebody, and that every accidental sound in the street acted as an electric shock upon his nervous system.

Lillie was no fool, and if she did not read these signs altogether correctly, they were at least sufficiently clear to her to quicken her exertions, while at the same time they imparted to the dreary future she was compelled to look at an additional hue of blackness.

By the middle of the next day everything was

ready, including Mr. Richard, who had been drinking wildly and recklessly from ten o'clock in the morning—but Lillie had prevailed on him to sleep for a couple of hours, and he had awakened with a dull pain in his head, but to some extent sobered and quiet.

They had but to send for a conveyance to take themselves and the last of their luggage to Marseilles, and to bid farewell to Maud and Louise, who were both going away together the next day, when a little accident occurred, not perhaps wholly undreamt of by Mr. Richard, which had the effect of somewhat deranging their plans, and which obliged the boat to those unknown shores to sail without its English passengers.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE NEWS FELIX BROUGHT FROM PARIS.

DR. PAGET faithfully kept his promise of sending to Elsie's husband daily bulletins of the progress she was making towards recovery, and if these were less satisfactory than either brother or husband could desire, they were at least quite as favorable as Elsie's condition on her first arrival in England ought to have led her relatives to expect.

Everything that tender love and care could do for this unhappy child, in her sore distress and misery, was gladly and cheerfully done by Joanna and her husband, as well as by Felix himself.

They nursed her ; they soothed her ; they petted her as in the old days, when she had been a drooping, sickly girl, dependent upon these same loving friends for every drop that sweetened the bitter cup of physical pain and weakness she had then been compelled to drink. But all things had changed for poor Elsie since then. She had risen from that sick bed to revel in the gift of glowing health ; and, in addition to this, to feed sumptuously at life's banquet of richest joy every day. Now, alas ! both health and dainty fare were taken from her ; and, having known and luxuriated in them, she could not be content with those small crumbs of comfort which had sufficed for her in her former ignorant state. Having lived as a monarch upon a throne, she could not sit down humbly or thankfully as a beggar upon a door step.

Elsie was not really ungrateful for all the kindness she had daily and hourly lavished upon her, but it was simply insufficient and unsatisfying, while her poor weak heart was hungering for her

husband's love, and still torn and distracted by its convictions that this love was given to another. She had no desire to see Edgar now; she never for a single instant doubted that all was at an end between them; for though Felix had told her of Mr. Carlyon's visit, and of the wish he had then expressed to have her back, her mind obstinately clung to the impression that only common humanity had prompted his search, and that had he found her he would have reproached and scorned her for the deceit she had practised upon him. Perhaps, unconsciously, Dr. Paget assisted in keeping up this delusion of his sister's. Her convictions, guardedly alluded to as they were, had assuredly influenced him again in his opinion of Edgar, and Elsie could not help discovering that whenever he spoke to her of her husband, there appeared to be a holding back of something, a hesitation in saying heartily and decidedly that he believed him to be true to her.

With Joanna it was indeed quite otherwise—Mr. Carlyon had from the first a warm and devoted

champion in her, and, of course, what she thought James Oliver thought likewise—but Elsie would never talk to her sister of the matter which had led to her running away from her home; and whenever Joanna attempted to break through this reserve, the wretched wife would implore her to be silent, and declare that she should go mad if she was forced to reflect upon what she had done.

“How can Joanna,” she once said to Felix, “know anything about a trouble like mine? She has a husband who not only worships her, but who sees no other woman in the world besides. Let her, in her perfect happiness, leave me alone in my utter misery.”

It would almost appear, from a fretful speech like this, that Elsie was envious of the calm blessedness which had, after years of sorrowful loneliness, fallen to the lot of her quiet sister, but if envy implies a wish to rob the person towards whom that unholy feeling is experienced of one particle of the good they possess, then poor little Elsie must not be set down as envious.

She did not want "dear Jo" to be one bit less happy or less beloved; but she wanted love and happiness so much herself, she pined so cruelly in their absence, that the contrast between her present destiny and the destiny of James Oliver's wife was continually forcing itself upon her notice.

She could not, under these circumstances, and hearing nothing from her husband—he had only very briefly acknowledged Dr. Paget's letter announcing her arrival—be expected to gain much health or strength, even in Joanna's home and with two doctors, a brother, and a zealous, pitying friend, to look after her and watch her daily. She did in truth make scarcely any progress at all, and Felix, whose nature had never been a very hopeful one, predicted in private to Mr. Oliver that the illness of her girlhood was fast returning upon her, and would, if not arrested, throw her into a decline.

How to arrest it, while that fever of the mind continued, was the question which puzzled the

brains of both Elsie's doctors continually. It ended in Mr. Oliver strongly advising Felix to go over to Paris and judge for himself how matters were getting on there. Mr. Carlyon might be acting upon his brother-in-law's suggestion and endeavouring to collect proofs that should satisfy his wife of her error, before he either came or wrote again. It was too bad to give a man serious counsel and then blame him if it appeared that he was adopting it. So at least James Oliver thought; and Felix, being unable to dispute the truth of what he advanced, yielded to his partner's judgment—we may be very sure it was dear Jo's also—and, without a hint to Elsie as to where he was going, started one fine morning on his mission to Paris.

He had promised to write the moment he arrived, but the post came in the day when his letter should have reached them, and brought no news of any kind. "What can be the meaning of it?" said Joanna, as her husband and herself discussed the matter during the walk she always

had with him to the surgery in the morning. "I am sure Felix would allow no trifle to stand in the way of his writing to us."

"Mr. Carlyon may be out of Paris, darling," suggested the husband, who could not bear that a shadow of anxiety should rest upon the face he loved, and which was such a fair and blooming face now compared to what it had once been; "and Felix may be following him up. We shall be quite sure to hear to-morrow."

They did not do so, however, and Joanna was becoming seriously uneasy, and finding it very difficult to hide her uneasiness from Elsie—whose pleasure it was to sit in a half darkened room all day—when early in the afternoon Dr. Paget walked in amongst them, and explained, his own silence at any rate, to their satisfaction.

At the end of an hour's close and earnest talking with Mr. and Mrs. Oliver, and just as Joanna had risen to go and make her brother some tea, Felix rose too and said—

"And now I will see Elsie at once if you please, dear Jo, for there is no time to be lost."

"But you are so tired from your rapid journey, Felix," pleaded his sister, "and nothing can be done to-night you know. Do have some tea here, with James, and in the meanwhile I can try to prepare that poor child for what you have to tell her."

"No, no," said Felix firmly, "I had better undertake Elsie on this occasion myself. I have an idea that she may give way to violent emotion which I shall probably be more skilful in subduing than you would. Having tea here with James is a great temptation, I admit, and sounds so pleasant and comfortable that I should strongly recommend your trying it yourself, Jo. You can keep a cup for me, which I will drink gladly when I have done with Elsie."

* * * *

"Oh, you are come back are you, Felix?" exclaimed the invalid, lifting her languid head as

her brother entered the room; "I am glad you have, because Jo has made Mr. Oliver see me while you were away, and I hate seeing him. I don't feel any stronger or better, Felix."

"No, my dear, I did not expect you would," he replied, sitting down and taking her hot, clammy hand in his own; "the body won't act without the assistance of the mind, and your mind, my poor child, is obstinately bent on acting as an executioner to your body. I wish with all my heart it were otherwise, Elsie."

"Well, but you know I can't help it, Felix," she said reproachfully; "nobody would be miserable if they could help it, I suppose. You all talk to me as if by a mere effort of the will I could throw off this intolerable burden, which is fast crushing the life out of me, and walk the earth a free and happy spirit again."

"No, Elsie, you could not perhaps do that, but don't you think if you had any active duty to perform, a duty that none but yourself *could* perform, you would be less intensely miserable?"

"Oh, I'm sure I can't tell," she said, beginning to cry, as she nearly always did at her interviews with her brother, "but the thing is impossible. I can be of use to nobody in the world—to nobody in the world—can I ever again be a first object. You would get on as well and much better without me. But I shall soon die—I am certain of it, Felix—and then you will see that it is so. I am much obliged to you all for bearing with me so patiently; I know I don't deserve it; but it won't be for long, only you need not say this to Jo, or she would be always preaching sermons to me."

"Elsie," resumed her brother, who was quite accustomed to wailings and prophecies of this nature, and not generally much intimidated by them, "I think I may be able to prove to you that you can still be of use in the world, and that there are duties awaiting your performance which none but yourself can undertake. Will you listen quietly to what I am going to tell you?"

He had succeeded at last in arousing her interest,

in convincing her that there was some special meaning in his words. Her face flushed deeply, and her white lips trembled a little as she said—

“I will listen as quietly as you like, Felix. Where, then, have you been?”

“To, Paris, Elsie, to find your husband, and give him full particulars of your state ; to ascertain also whether you had any real excuse for leaving him as you did, to enquire—but for Heaven’s sake, child, keep calm, or I cannot tell you another word.”

“Oh,” cried the half insane wife, clasping her companion’s arm wildly, while every feature quivered with terrible emotion, “don’t, I implore of you, tell me anything that will put a seal upon my own fears—don’t, if you have seen that woman, describe her to me, or repeat a syllable that she may have said either in denial or acknowledgment of her having won my husband from me. I could not bear it, Felix ; I should go mad in your very sight. Don’t I see her all the long nights through—don’t I——”

Her gasping breath was nearly choking her, and Felix, loosening her wild fingers, and holding them tightly in his own, said, almost sternly—

“You *are* mad as it is, I think, Elsie. The only woman I am going to tell you about is one who has been cruelly and brutally murdered, and of whose murder your husband, Edgar Carlyon, has been publicly accused.”

It was no intentional harshness, nor even careless indifference to his sister's feelings, that urged Felix to announce his news in this abrupt manner. He was aware that above all things she required to be roused out of herself, and the incessant contemplation of her own wrongs. He had long foreseen the most serious consequences if this could not be done, and formidable as was the remedy he now applied, his judgment assured him that it was not more than adequate to the disease he sought to deal with.

“*And of whose murder your husband, Edgar Carlyon, has been publicly accused!*”

He spoke the words very slowly and distinctly,

looking Elsie steadily in the face, and only slightly tightening his grasp of the hands he held.

But she struggled passionately to get these nervous hands free, stood upright on her feet (though for days she had declared her total inability to rise from her couch), and with dilated eyes and burning cheeks asked imperatively, "*What woman?*"

"A poor and aged woman, Elsie, a servant, with whom it is stated he had held high and angry words the evening before she was found murdered. If you will keep calm I will tell you the story more in detail. You had better sit down on your sofa again, my dear."

Elsie felt herself growing faint, so she sat down.

Then Felix went on—

"It appears that Mr. Carlyon had gone over to some place in the neighbourhood of Paris to see a friend—we will call the place St. Cloud—and that finding this friend absent from home,

he enquired of the old woman in charge of the house whither her mistress had gone—Now try to keep quiet, Elsie; remember that something graver than jealousy is in question here—the old woman refused with a great deal of obstinacy to tell. She said, indeed, that she did not know, but your husband had reasons for doubting this statement. He had also special reasons for desiring the means of communicating immediately with his absent friend; and, enraged by the woman's continued denial of any knowledge of her mistress's whereabouts, he stormed, and even swore at her, pretty roundly, until a knot of idlers were attracted to the gates where the colloquy was being held, and stood listening to the quarrel. Finally, Mr. Carlyon had to go away no wiser than he had come, and in returning to Paris he had for a companion in the railway carriage a gentleman who it appears used to give you music lessons, and who consequently recognised your husband and talked a little with him on the road.

“That night—it is supposed—the old woman, in

some mysterious manner, came by her death. She was found a corpse the next morning, when, on the assertion of one of the tradespeople that they could get no answer to their repeated ringing for admittance, the police forced their way into the premises and took their observations of all that they saw. There were no signs whatever of the house having been broken into, no litter, no confusion of any description, and as far as could be hastily ascertained from the report of the first doctor who arrived on the spot, the old woman had lost her life by a blow on the head while struggling desperately—so it was asserted—with her murderer. I need not tell you, Elsie, how quickly the public mind is aroused and excited by an incident of this tragical kind—how much stronger on many occasions is the thirst for a victim on whom to wreak the indignant feelings thus, called into life than the calm desire to find out who that victim ought to be. Nobody can say positively from what quarter the whisper first was heard, but there *was* a whisper in the neighbourhood—

while all as yet was question and consternation and doubt—to the effect that the English gentleman who had railed so at the old woman the day before, *might* have come back later in the evening and committed the foul deed. I cannot for a moment suppose that, without a shadow of evidence against him, a Frenchman would have been accused in his own country of a similar crime; but Mr. Carlyon's reserve and haughtiness of manner have rendered him, I am told, unpopular amongst the class of people who had chiefly to do with this affair. Anyhow, through some blundering, through more spite, and because time was not taken to investigate the matter, that first whisper was repeated, and carried on, and exaggerated, till it became the expression of public opinion, and finally resulted in Mr. Carlyon's arrest and examination before the appointed authorities. A little more patience, Elsie, and then my story will be finished, and you shall say and do what you will. The only witnesses who appeared against him were the

handful of people who had heard his quarrel with the old woman, and that Monsieur Ravina who had been in the railway carriage with him. The music master asserted that your husband had seemed much excited, and that every now and then, when not engaged in talking, he had muttered what sounded like angry exclamations or imprecations to himself. It was quite clear that for some reason or other this man regarded Mr. Carlyon with personal dislike, and rejoiced in an opportunity of witnessing against him. The whole case, however, was ridiculously poor, and would have been dismissed after the first hearing, had your husband been able to bring forward anyone to show where he had spent the evening of the murder; but there was only his own unsupported assertion that he had spent it in walking about the Paris streets (his father having been prevented by indisposition from dining with him as originally intended) till about eleven o'clock, when his own servants could testify to his having come home and gone to bed. Subse-

quently there arose more evidence about his being the only person who ever had access to the house where the murder was committed, and consequently the only one likely to have gone in and out without some traces being left of a stranger's presence; and in short, the case was beginning to assume at any rate an annoying aspect, when the tide suddenly turned by a lady coming forward—another friend of yours, Elsie, the friend who so recently sheltered you—and declaring that she had herself, coming away late from the residence of a pupil in the neighbourhood of the fatal villa, seen two men, one of whom she recognised, lurking suspiciously under the walls, and talking low and very earnestly together. At the same time some tradesperson who knew your husband by sight suddenly came forward and declared that Mr. Carlyon had twice passed his shop on the evening in question, between the hours of eight and ten. Now as it had been previously ascertained that at nine o'clock that night the old woman was not only alive but doing some shopping in the village,

the whole case, as regarded your husband, fell to the ground, and he was discharged immediately, while a warrant was issued for the apprehension of those other two men observed by Madame Le Clerc near the house, one of whom, as I told you, she recognised and described, while the other is more than guessed at by the police. Elsie, you know your husband's character better than I do, and will therefore perhaps not be surprised to hear that a very serious illness has been the consequence of the degradation to which he was so cruelly subjected. His pride, his habits of reserve, all the strongest instincts of his nature were assailed and wounded by this public accusation, in the course of which many family secrets were dragged into notice in a manner most vexatious and humiliating to the parties concerned. Now don't tremble so, Elsie, or I shall fear to tell you the rest, fear to tell you that your husband was immediately after his honorable acquittal seized with something resembling brain fever, and is now lying in a totally prostrate condition in his

own house, with only his old father, who is nearly heart-broken, and a hired nurse to attend upon him."

Here Dr. Paget ceased speaking, and fetching a glass of water from a table at hand, mixed in it a few drops of a liquid he took from his pocket and held it to his sister's white lips. But Elsie thrust it impatiently from her.

"I don't want stimulants, or sedatives, or medicine of any kind, Felix. I want to go to Edgar immediately. I am quite strong enough to go, and to go alone if you cannot take me. May I start to-night?"

Although her brother saw that she spoke under intense excitement, and that this excitement was giving her momentary strength, he was quite sure that her reason and judgment would hereafter confirm what her heart was now deciding on, so assuming his firm, doctor's tone, he answered—

"You may certainly go, Elsie, on the condition of your submitting implicitly to all my directions for the support of your bodily strength, which

otherwise, my poor child, strong as you feel at present, would give way before you had been ten minutes out of this house. And I will go with you, Elsie, not only on your account, but because I have important business of my own in France just now. But are you quite sure of being in earnest in this matter?—quite resolved to nurse your husband tenderly and dutifully, in spite of that unknown rival who has so long haunted your imagination, and concerning whom you have as yet received no satisfactory explanation?”

“Oh, Felix?” cried poor Elsie passionately, not knowing that her brother was only wounding her before he healed, “how cruel and wicked you are to doubt my love for Edgar. It is enough for me that he is ill and miserable, and that *she* is not there with him. My poor Edgar, who would not hurt an insect, to be accused of murder. Oh, if I had only wings that I might fly to him this very hour. The suspense of the journey will kill me, Felix.”

“We must hope not, Elsie,” replied Felix

kindly, and again possessing himself of her restless hands, "for if you are happy enough to arrive in time to be of use to your husband, I don't think there need be any more clouds or even shadows between you, *I* have sifted that matter you know of to the bottom, Elsie, and I can give you my solemn word that Edgar Carlyon deserved none of the calumnies you listened to concerning him. He has been true to you in heart and word and deed; and the innocent lady you so needlessly frightened yourself about has a husband of her own, who, after many years' separation, is now about to seek her, for at present she is lost also——"

He had to stop abruptly here, for his last news had proved too much for the poor little wife. The sudden tide of joy and relief rushing in upon her weakened brain disturbed all its functions for the moment, and without a word or cry she leant on her brother's shoulder and fainted.

CHAPTER XIX.

A WELCOME HOME.

No fear now of Elsie's not attending scrupulously to all Dr. Paget's orders on the subject of her health. Had he told her to eat a bullock, or to drink a hogshead of port wine, she would no doubt have tried to do it if he had promised that she should thereby gain sufficient strength to perform quickly the journey to Paris. He did manage to build her up so that they could start the next morning, but even Felix did not know to what a fearful extent her mental suffering had undermined her constitution, and he was terribly disappointed and alarmed when before they could

even cross the channel the poor girl broke down utterly. They had to remain very nearly a week at Dover, a week of torture to them both, for Dr. Paget had scarcely less reason for anxiety to get on than his sister, but there was clearly no help for it if Elsie's life was to be saved; and her brother knew this and did his best to be patient himself and to keep her patient also.

At length there came a calm, sunny day, under whose influence the invalid felt really better, and equal to the short sea voyage. This fortunately appeared to do her good, and without any further accidents they pursued their journey, and arrived late one night—Elsie wofully exhausted, but full of hope and spirits—at Mr. Carlyon's house, the home his wife had weakly deserted, but which she was entering again now as a penitent, sanguine of forgiveness.

She did not expect to find her husband quite well, but she had always pictured him coming down pale and feeble into the hall to receive her. Felix had written from Dover to say they were

on their road, and he had had a line in reply from the old man telling him that Edgar was mending. Nothing more indeed than this, but still Elsie could not doubt that all would be right the moment they were together. Now that her horrible fears of a rival were removed; now that she saw no longer that floating vision in the air, mocking at her anguish, her elastic mind refused to admit the possibility of continued coldness or misunderstanding between her husband and herself. She would be so repentant, so humble, so deeply sorry for all the past; and resting in his arms and telling him how she had ever loved him, could he do less than pity and forgive her, forgive her even the worst of her sins against him, and surround her with an atmosphere of affection and of tenderness as of old!

It was rather a shock and decidedly a disappointment to the returning wife that her husband did not appear in the hall to receive and welcome her, although Felix had got out of the carriage first, and had announced her arrival and

extremely delicate state of health to the household.

As soon as might be, Clarice came forward to assist her mistress, and several of the other domestics eagerly proffered their services to both the travellers; but no mention was made as yet of the master of the house, and Dr. Paget had to ask in an undertone of the respectable butler how and where his master was.

"He left home only yesterday," was the reply in the same cautious voice that the questioner had adopted, "but monsieur's father is staying here—he is just taking his evening nap. We will immediately arouse him and announce Madame Edgar's arrival."

Which, under the circumstances, Felix thought it might be as well to do, especially as Madame Edgar was by this time deluged in tears, and her brother knew she could ill endure any fresh agitation.

"I shall feel obliged by your doing so," he said, and then turning to his sister he put his arm

protectingly round her waist, and whispered to her an entreaty to keep calm. But at that instant somebody opened the dining-room door and there bounded out of it a huge animal, barking loudly and joyously as he recognized his long lost mistress, and greeted her with demonstrations that, however rough, were unmistakably expressive of a fond and unchanged affection.

"My poor Hector, my good faithful old dog," exclaimed Elsie, as his great paws rested lovingly on her shoulders, but then her courage and power of self command deserted her suddenly, and the tears which had flowed quietly if rapidly before, grew into loud hysterical crying.

So loud indeed that they broke the peaceful slumbers of the old gentleman in the drawing-room on the other side of hall, and hurriedly bustling out, only half awake, he did not, at first, recognize either his daughter-in-law or her companion.

"Oh, Mr. Carlyon," said, or rather sobbed, Elsie, running up to him the instant he appeared, "where is Edgar, and why does nobody take me

to him at once, if he is too ill to come to me? I want to see my husband."

"God bless my soul!" replied the bewildered parent; "whoever would have thought of your arriving at this time of night, and looking like a corpse too, and crying just as you cried the last time I saw you? Here, come in out of the hearing of these gaping servants, and then I will answer your questions. Dr. Paget, I beg your pardon for not noticing you sooner, but I had just fallen into a little dose; and I have been very unwell of late. Walk in, both of you."

So they walked in (for it was plain the old man was not in the best of tempers) and Felix laid his little sister on a sofa, ordering tea to be immediately prepared for her, and then turned to Mr. Carlyon for his promised explanation.

"Well," said the latter, rubbing his eyes and looking askance and by no means lovingly at his recumbent daughter-in-law, who was even unnaturally quiet now, with Hector stretched in perfect contentment at her feet, "I wrote you

word that Edgar was on the mend. He insisted on my making the best of the matter to you, but I thought myself that he got back his strength monstrous slowly. He was always worrying about his cousin, and declaring he could not be at rest till she was found. So things went on, till one fine morning there arrived a letter for me from this truant lady herself, a letter, mind you, that I ought to have received some time before, but which had been delayed unaccountably on its road from the south. From the style of this letter's contents, I judge that Mistress Mand had no intention of revealing to us the place of her abode—she only said she was safe and happy with friends who were very kind to her, and that some day she would disclose her reasons for quitting Versailles so abruptly—but, like a woman, she forgot that the postmark of the letter would betray her. By this postmark, we were enabled to give a very near guess as to more riddles than one. In point of fact, we made out that the missing lady was

with the Wilmots, and nothing would do but Edgar must start off the next day, all unfit for travelling as he was, to have an interview with Maud at once. Besides his one grand object," (here the narrator glanced again almost savagely at Elsie), "his kind heart prompted him to wish to break gently to his cousin the news of her old servant's death. And I may add also that we have some reason to think the police have tracked one of the real murderers to his own home, and by this time probably arrested him. Edgar felt that he might be of use to the poor women in such an awful case, and I should have gone too, but that he made it a personal favour that I should wait here to receive his runaway wife."

"And won't Edgar forgive me, Mr. Carlyon?" poor Elsie asked, in such a plaintive, piteous voice, that it must have melted any heart but a father-in-law's.

"You can ask him that question yourself, young lady," was the cool reply; "for I shall decline to interfere in the matter. Thus much I

am requested to tell you, namely, that your husband—let me say your noble-minded husband—has taken this fatiguing journey chiefly to get his cousin's permission to reveal as much of her history to you as shall convince you once and for ever how cruelly you have wronged him. He would not, he declared, after all that has passed, see you again till he could bring you other proofs, besides his unsupported word, of having ever been true to you. Shame on you, that you should have doubted a husband who, when every appearance was against you, never, for a single instant, doubted you."

Elsie might have deserved this reproof—I am very far from saying she did not—but she was certainly not in a condition to bear it to-night. Mr. Carlyon, incensed as he was at the weakness and childishness of her past conduct, could not help being sorry for his harshness when he found her going from one fainting fit into another, and listened to her vexed brother's solemn assurances that her life was in reality hanging on a thread.

She was so little better the next morning that, when Felix (having received further tidings which necessitated his immediately proceeding to the south) was obliged to leave her, Mr. Carlyon summoned the doctor she had declined seeing on a former occasion, and made him princely offers, if by devoting a double portion of his time to this poor little drooping flower, he could save its already half extinguished life.

CHAPTER XX.

THE END OF POOR LILLIE'S LIVE STOCK.

MR. RICHARD WILMOT had never been much troubled with scruples of conscience in respect of voluntary submission to "the powers that be." In his best and soberest moods he would no doubt have fought for his liberty, had that precious birthright of an Englishman been rudely threatened, with all the energy of which his somewhat dissolute habits had left him master. It was, therefore, quite natural that when a magistrate's warrant found him in a state of semi-intoxication, and on the very eve of his escape to a distant land, this ill-used, baited

gentleman should begin by swearing and cursing loudly in his native language, and end by fighting with all the courage of drunkenness and desperation, with the officers of the law who arrested him on the double charge of housebreaking and murder !

It was a frightful scene, and one that the terror-stricken women who witnessed it could never in all their after lives forget. But it was very brief. The Frenchmen did their duty, not more roughly, we may presume, than the circumstances of the case necessitated ; and Mr. Richard Wilmiot, raving like a madman, foaming at the mouth with impotent passion, and swearing by every saint in heaven and on earth—(his friend Stefano had probably inoculated him with some Popish doctrines) that he was innocent, fell at last mortally wounded by the sword of one of the officers of justice, and was declared by a village Esculapius, promptly summoned, to be in too dangerous a state to bear a removal from his own home.

"Then one of us must remain here if you please, madame," said the officer, who had been unfortunate enough to do the deed, to poor Lillie, kneeling white and speechless beside the bleeding body of her husband. "It is a mere form, if, as this gentleman asserts, Monsieur is mortally wounded; and you will be neither disturbed nor intruded on in your duties in any way. We will retire to another room while a bed is brought in here for the sufferer. Ah, what a misfortune that Monsieur would not recognize the dignity and authority of the law."

Poor Dick was quite unconscious by this time from pain and loss of blood, or no doubt, in spite of what had happened, he would have expressed a wish that the law and all its myrmidons might be banished to a place somewhat more remote than even the one to which he had himself so recently been bound.

Mrs. Richard Wilmot heard the officer's courteous address, but her tongue seemed paralysed

in her mouth, and she could only make a slight movement of the head in acknowledgment of the civility shown to her. She kept her kneeling posture beside the stricken man—how strange it seemed to her to gaze upon her tyrant lying still and silent there—and it was Maud and Louise who, assisted by the friendly surgeon after he had bound up the wounds, busied themselves—all trembling and frightened as they were—in getting a bed into the room where the tragic scene had occurred, and in preparing the various remedies for mitigating the sufferings of the dying man which the doctor hurriedly suggested to them.

It was all done at last—the room cleared of everything superfluous, the blinds fast closed, the extra bandages, the little bottles of stimulating cordials, and the soothing ointments ranged neatly on a small table near the bed, and finally Mr. Richard himself lifted very carefully and tenderly from the hard floor on to the softer resting

place, and utter silence—like the hush of the grave it seemed to the solitary watcher—reigning in the darkened room.

For the surgeon had gone away for the present, believing that the fainting fit of his patient had merged into sleep; Maud and Louise were occupied in establishing the officer on duty in the deserted bed room of Mr. and Mrs. Wilmot, and in getting him something to eat; and thus it was that poor Lillie sat alone by her wretched husband's bed, and listening nervously to the beating of her heart, plainly audible in the deep stillness of the room.

We will not even try to conjecture what her secret thoughts were as she turned from time to time to contemplate the strangely altered features of the man who had so cruelly darkened all her young life, but who was paying the penalty of his own sins in such a sudden and awful manner. It might be that the wife's mind was in too bewildered a state for connected thought of any kind, and that feeling alone—feeling of which

horror and alarm were the chief elements—held dominion over her. She looked indeed scarcely less pale than the motionless form upon the bed, and no soft, womanly tears had as yet fallen to relieve the tension of the brain; but a skilful reader of human faces might have been able to detect in poor Lillie's scared expression, less of the mental anguish whose traces will last a life time, and which the thought of being suddenly deprived of a good and loving husband would inevitably excite, than the shrinking terror and dread which would be inspired in any woman's soul by even hearing a description of such a scene as *this* woman had been compelled to witness.

Perhaps Lillie had a difficulty in realizing the fact of absolute danger, danger of *life*, to the man who only an hour ago had been full of health and strength and vigour. Could it be possible that he, her reprobate Dick, whose very name caused all her family to shudder, would indeed be still and silent and harmless for evermore, his tyranny all done, his blustering all done, and he himself

lying under some green cypresses in a holy burial ground, side by side with the most peaceful and respectable of his countrymen.

“Dust to dust, ashes to ashes;” the inevitable end of the righteous and the unrighteous—and not a living soul, in this man’s case, if his poor wife’s heart did not grow pitiful and forgiving, ever to come again to the spot where he would be buried, or give one passing thought to the ignoble “dust and ashes” which would alone remain of what *had* been Richard Wilmot.

Suddenly while Lillie still sat at her dreary watching, chiding her coward heart that it beat too loudly for her to hear distinctly the sick man’s breathing, there was a faint movement of the bed clothes, and, immediately after that, an unmistakable though rather faint groan from the sufferer.

“Dick,” she whispered softly, getting up and bending over him—“I am here. Can I relieve you in any way?”

Another louder groan, and then Mr. Richard,

trying vainly to move, and becoming conscious of an immense increase of agony in the attempt, answered hoarsely—

“What has that French devil done to me, Lillie? Am I hurt seriously?”

“You are very badly wounded, Richard,” she said, gently; “but we will do all we can to lessen your sufferings. The surgeon will be round again by and bye, and here is a nice cordial he told me to give you as soon as you were awake. Will you drink it at once?”

“I’d sooner have some brandy, my ‘girl,” he replied, shivering violently, either from cold or from some sudden paroxysm of pain; “but I’ll take that first, if it is to do me any good—oh, by Jingo! Lillie, I’m getting it, I can tell you. A fellow couldn’t bear this sort of thing many hours without putting a bullet through his own head. Why didn’t the clumsy fool blow my brains out at once, instead of maiming me in this diabolical fashion. There’s nobody but you in the room, is there?”

"Nobody, Richard. Do you wish to see any one?"

"The saints forbid! I was going to tell you to keep everybody out, to lock the door and prevent even that idiot of a French surgeon from coming in again. Lillie, it's about the last act of obedience I shall exact from you, and you won't refuse to perform it, if in return I consent to swallow all the trash you offer me, with a view to keep my strength up. I want it kept up while I say a few words to you, and then it may go as fast as ever it likes—the faster the better, if these burning torments are to continue. Here, girl, I'll toss off that stuff to satisfy you, but you must hold the glass, for my hands are dead already, I think. I cannot lift either of them."

Lillie, with shaking knees and curdling blood, did as her husband requested, and after he had drunk the cordial he appeared a little revived and strengthened, desiring again that the door might be locked, and watching his wife anxiously while she did it.

"Now come here, Lillie, and don't be frightened to sit close to a poor fellow who is dying, (worse luck to the fiend who killed me) and whose death will be no great loss to you, whatever it may be to society in general; I want to tell you, my girl, before it's all over with me, that I had nothing whatever to do with the killing of the old woman for whose murder I was arrested. My companion, a Spanish or Italian rascal, who thinks nothing of such deeds, dispatched her in a minute, before I could interfere, and while she was fighting like a brick to protect her mistress's property. He ought to be hanged or beheaded for it, as I daresay he will be. I only shared with Stefano some plate and a few jewels we found, and helped him to put everything in order, and remove all traces of the house having been feloniously entered. Yes, one thing more I did, Lillie, which I may as well mention while I am making a clean breast of it. I got up a report that Edgar Carlyon had sent the old lady into the other world. There were one or two

suspicious circumstances to help me, and I had sworn to have my revenge upon that insolent aristocrat, as he thinks himself, sooner or later. I couldn't wait, however, in Paris to hear the result of his examination. I knew there would be no case against him, but I knew too that the public accusation would bring down his pride to the dust, and I can't repent of what I did, even with my own grave yawning to take me in. What I do repent of, Lillie, is my hardness to you, for, saving a spice of sauciness now and then, you have been a good, true wife to me. But Dick Wilmot was never much of a hand at the heroics, and you mustn't expect him to indulge in them now, with these burning pains tearing the very life out of a fellow's body. I say, Lillie, there's some meddling fool or other at the door. Don't let them in whatever you do. It's hard indeed if a man mayn't die in private."

Lillie, who had listened to all the above (spoken in a weak, faltering voice and with frequent stops between) as people listen in a dream to wondrous

revelations, got up and went herself to answer the knocking at the door.

It was Maud come to announce the return of the surgeon who wished, as his time was precious, to be admitted to see Mr. Wilmot immediately.

"Let him go and be hanged!" cried the patient from the bed, making a desperate effort to raise his voice and impart a little firmness to it "I've been murdered by a French bloodhound, and no French hacker of limbs can bring me to life again. Send the fellow away, and tell him to get his fee from those who laid me here. Lillie, my girl," (in a milder tone) "you won't go away from me?"

"No, no, Richard," said his wife, returning (after she had exchanged a few words with Maud through the chinks of the locked door) and taking her chair by the bed again. "I will not leave you at all, but I am miserable in being able to do nothing for you."

"You're not a bad sort, Lillie," he replied,

trying once more to lift one of his paralyzed hands to touch the hand of his wife, but failing in the attempt. "You're not a bad sort, and, honestly, my good girl, I'm not worth a single tear from you. I've been a selfish, reckless fellow all my life, and now that I am going the way of all flesh, why I suppose it's natural that I should wish I had been a little different. Oh, by Jingo! that *was* a pain, Lillie; give me some more of your cordial. I feel faintish, and awful queer, I can tell you."

Poor Lillie was terribly agitated, terribly alarmed, and would have given worlds to have had either Maud or Louise with her; but it was her husband's will that she alone should remain, and having yielded to that will for so many years, she would not oppose, whatever it might cost her, its last unconsciously imperious exercise.

When the cordial had soothed him for the moment, and he was lying back pale, but comparatively quiet on his pillows, the wife once more bent timidly, but with infinite gentleness,

“Now, my dear, let me see if I can’t do something for you.”

over him, and asked if he would mind her reading something out of the Bible to him.

But Mr. Richard feebly shook his head. "I couldn't listen, my girl, if I tried ever so. When a man's as near his end as I am, and racked with fierce bodily pains, he may pretend to turn saint, but I, for one, should never believe him. You may say your prayers for me if you will, old woman, and I won't disturb you while you do so; but for myself, I am passed all that, and I think now, a bit of sleep, if I could get it, would do me more good than anything."

There was a sleeping draught at hand, which Lillie had been told to administer in case of need. This Mr. Richard swallowed eagerly, and ten minutes afterwards he appeared to have sunk into quite a calm and undisturbed slumber.

Lillie might very easily now have left the room, and sought the companionship and the sympathy of which she stood so cruelly in need; but her promise to her dying husband not to leave him for a moment was sacred in her eyes, and she

kept her post unflinchingly, while the dreary night hours wore on, and while every minute added to her sore fatigue of mind and body.

Towards morning, utterly exhausted by her long watching and fasting, and agitation, this poor Lillie leant her weary, aching head on the back of her easy chair, and fell into a light, unrestful sleep herself. She never knew how long it lasted, for she had no watch or clock in the room by which she might have marked the hours; but she awoke suddenly with a start, and a chill feeling of awe and dread, that resembled nothing she had ever felt in all her life before.

The night lamp was still burning, but its flame was pale and dim in the more brilliant light of the morning sun, which streamed in garishly through every crevice and accidental aperture of those carefully closed shutters. Lillie waited an instant after her eyes were open to collect her wandering senses, and then she breathed a quick prayer for courage, and turned, shaking in every limb, towards her husband's bed.

There was no shriek, no exclamation—only a tightening of the breath, a nervous clutching for support at the chair she had just quitted, as her terrified eyes gazed upon all that the earth could now claim of the misguided, selfish, tyrannical, and reckless Dick Wilmot.

Let his errors die with him, since none can suffer from them any more for ever; and the poor Lillie, who suffered most, will draw a veil of charity over all, and even go sometimes to that shady cemetery where his body lies, and shed a tear as she thinks of the wasted life and premature death of her hapless, if troublesome, “live stock.”

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LAST.

THE most zealous and active co-worker that poor Lillie found in establishing the innocence of her dead husband as regarded the worst of the crimes imputed to him, was Edgar Carlyon, the man whom Richard Wilmot had most unjustifiably and cruelly injured. But it is doubtful whether they would have succeeded in their efforts had not the Signor Stefano, whose capture took place soon after that of poor Dick, revealed, under the instigation no doubt of his confessor, the particulars of the whole transaction. So Richard Wilmot's memory was rescued from the worst part of the

obloquy that would otherwise have attached to it, and Lillie had the mournful satisfaction of choosing a quiet, unnoticed spot in the Protestant burying ground of the neighbourhood as his final resting-place.

It need scarcely be stated that her husband's death did not enrich Mrs. Wilmot in a pecuniary point of view. The very little money which was discovered amongst those effects that had been got together in readiness for their owner's long voyage scarcely sufficed for the expenses of his funeral, and for the widow's mourning. But independently of Edgar Carlyon's liberal and brotherly offers, money from various quarters was showered upon poor Lillie in the early days of her widowhood with a lavishness, on the part of the donors, that affected as much as it surprised her.

Madame Guinchard, the moment the news of Richard's death reached her, sent her sister a cheque for fifty pounds, adding that she would herself have flown to comfort her "darling

Lillie" (though, indeed, she could not help thinking the *loss* a subject of congratulation, her own sole regret in the matter being that she could never now have an opportunity of "punching that man's head for him"), only Monsieur Guinchard would not hear of her leaving home without him ; and she hated travelling with fidgetty, elderly men.

Mr. and Mrs. Oliver wrote also immediately, and sent, in addition to a handsome present in money, an [earnest, pressing invitation to Lillie to come and stay as long as she liked with them.

Felix was on the spot, and not behind the others in his kindness and generosity to the beloved sister, who had at length been given back, after years of no common suffering, to her own people again.

Finally, Mr. Carus Cheviot enclosed, in a most friendly and delicately worded epistle, a very munificent gift, which poor Lillie would have refused (gratefully as she appreciated his sym-

pathy and kindness), had the writer not added with much simplicity—"You know, my dearest lady, I am old enough to be your father, and have had trials of a peculiar nature, which, never mind now! of my own; and so I have earned the right to pity and help the unfortunate."

But the fact thus magnanimously brought forward of his being old enough to be Mrs. Wilmot's father, which was really the case, did not hinder Mr. Cheviot from following Lillie to England when the first year of her widowhood had expired, and laying his hand and fortune at the feet. If no mention was made of the *heart* it was only because he knew that poor Lillie must have been quite conscious of his having possessed that since the day he had picked up her scattered volumes on the stairs, and discovered that she was a country-woman and unhappy.

There were a few of Mrs. Wilmot's friends who thought it a pity that she could not overlook the disparity of years, and become Mrs. Carus Cheviot; and Lillie did not deem it necessary to

tell them that had an Adonis of five-and-twenty, with the riches of a nabob, and the accomplishments of an admirable Crichton, made her a similar offer, she could never have been tempted to embark on the treacherous ocean of married life again. Most people were reconciled to her decision, when, a few years later, Mr. Cheviot died, and left the whole of his property, without reserve or conditions of any kind, to his dear and esteemed friend Mrs. Richard Wilmot.

This increase of wealth, and consequently of importance, did not make poor Lillie much happier than she had been before, in visiting amongst those beloved ones who prized her visits beyond words, in cheering and comforting the declining years of her sick parents, and in manifesting to all, that out of the fierce fire of tribulation in which she had so long been tried, she had "come forth as gold."

Felix and his wife, re-united after their six years of separation and apparent forgetfulness

of each other, were wiser and happier than they probably would have been had they only gradually awakened from the headstrong passion which had dictated their hasty and secret marriage.

The husband indeed had some difficulty in entirely forgiving his wife for having concealed from him the birth of their child. He thought that the existence of such a mutual interest, of such a holy bond between them, ought to have triumphed over all the wounded pride and outraged feelings for which he acknowledged frankly, when he had heard the whole truth, that Maud had ample excuse.

But her tears, as she told of her own bitter desolation on the death of her little girl, and of her yearnings then for reconciliation with him, melted the husband's heart, and, pressing his poor childless wife tenderly in his arms, he told her he would endeavour henceforth to be more to her than ten children.

But there was yet another reconciliation,

another re-union of divided lives, if not of divided hearts, to take place before my story can be ended.

Edgar Carlyon, having found his cousin and obtained his entire absolution from all the promises he had ever made her, having received too, authority from the same source to relate her whole history to his wife, lingered in the south only till Dr. Paget's arrival enabled him to relinquish the charge of Maud and Lillie, and then hastened back to where he knew his poor little sick Elsie was impatiently and yearningly waiting for him.

It was a deeply interesting and a deeply affecting meeting, though no word or even look of reproach from the husband was permitted to mar the wife's perfect and absolute contentment in having him with her again. Resting in his loving arms, in the way she had so often pictured, gazing up fondly into his kind and anxious face, Elsie told all her tale of doubt and wretchedness

and madness—and when it was done, and only a few quiet tears were succeeding the excitement of the narration,, Edgar drew her closer to him, kissed the pale, wasted cheek that was still fair and beautiful in his eyes, and said with earnest feeling—

“ My darling, if you are spared to me I will never again have a secret from you, and you must promise me, Elsie, to talk freely of every foolish or uneasy thought that arises in your restless little brain.”

It was a long and a weary time before Edgar could reckon with any degree of certainty upon having his wife spared to him ; and even when all immediate apprehensions of a fatal termination to her illness were at an end, she remained, and was likely to remain, an invalid, requiring incessant care and watching, her whole life through. As Felix had predicted, the weakness of her girlhood had returned upon her, and both her husband and herself were fain to accept this cross

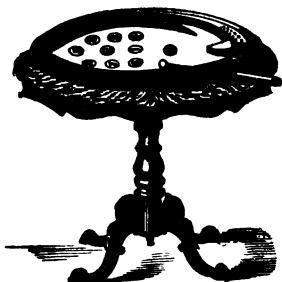
and bear it side by side with that crown of perfect love and trust which at length their married lives had been blessed with.

Doubtless it was a cross, as pain either of mind or body to frail and shrinking humanity must ever be. But what then ? It has a mission which nothing else can perform, an errand of love which no other Angelic agent from the heavenly courts can so well or so effectually execute ; and

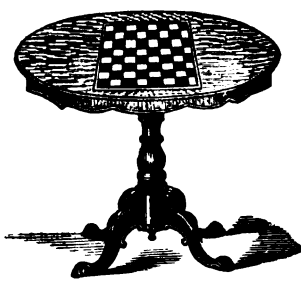
" Since in that shadow our work is done,
And in that shadow our crowns are won,
Let us say still, while his bitter chalice
Slowly into our hearts is poured,
" Blessed is he that cometh
In the name of the Lord !"

THE END.

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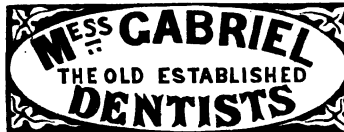
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